

BRITISH PARATROOPER 1940–45



REBECCA SKINNER

ILLUSTRATED BY GRAHAM TURNER

WARRIOR 174

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Series editor Marcus Cowper

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INTRODUCTION

Two Paras board an Armstrong Whitworth Whitley bomber in clean fatigues, i.e. without kit, in 1940. The Whitley was the first aircraft used by British paratroopers, carrying men for both the Tragino Aqueduct and Bruneval raids, before being superseded by the Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle and Douglas Dakota.

On 22 June 1940 Prime Minister Winston Churchill wrote an instruction to his Chief of Staff: ‘We ought to have a corps of at least five thousand parachute troops.... I hear something is being done already to form such a corps but only, I believe on a very small scale. Advantage must be taken of the summer to train these forces, who can none the less play their part meanwhile as shock troops in home defence.’

This simple instruction would lead to the formation of a new British Airborne Force with The Parachute Regiment as its core. Its men would fight some of the most iconic battles of World War II, earning the respect of their enemy for their skill and commitment.

Churchill had observed the growth of German airborne capability and sought to copy the idea for the British Army. The Germans were not the first to come up with the idea: the Russians and Italians had both started trials in the

1920s to consider how airborne troops could be utilized before each began the process of building up a force of their own. Western military attachés reported back to their respective governments on this, having watched demonstrations of their capability. The Germans in particular took note, for they were then still bound by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles that restricted the reconstruction of an air force. However, with the rise of Adolf Hitler, the *Fallschirmjäger* began to take form; and it was this force that Churchill watched being used so effectively against British forces in April and May 1940 that led to the small note being written to his Chief of Staff.

Two days after the note was written, Maj. John F. Rock of the Royal Engineers was summoned to the War Office and given the order to begin the formation of British Airborne Forces. By the following month, men from No. 2 Commando were beginning their parachute training at RAF Ringway. This unit of men formed the core of what was to become The Parachute Regiment, which was officially founded on 1 August 1942 and grew to 17 battalions by August 1945.





The period 1940–45 is arguably the most significant in the history of The Parachute Regiment. It not only established itself as a unit, but also saw the evolution of the distinct character and ethos of the regiment that continues to the present day. Many of the men from this era became legendary figures whose stories have been long remembered following their deaths. A simple photo of the 2nd Parachute Battalion's officers' mess taken shortly before Arnhem reveals a wealth of famous faces: Lt. Col. John Frost who held Arnhem Bridge for four nights; Lt. John 'Jack' Grayburn who was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross; Maj. Digby Tatham-Warter who took out an armoured vehicle with an umbrella; Maj. John Timothy who won three Military Crosses in the space of 18 months; the list goes on.

This photo of the 2nd Parachute Battalion officers' mess was taken shortly before Operation *Market-Garden* in 1944. This small group contains man after man who became renowned for their character and bravery. Men like these formed the identity of The Parachute Regiment.

Battle was a regular experience for the soldier in The Parachute Regiment during World War II, and over the course of the war the regiment earned 29 battle honours. The first of these came at Bruneval on the northern coast of France in February 1942, with a company-sized attack on a radar station. This early success was essential in proving critics of The Parachute Regiment wrong by showcasing the capability this new force offered. By November 1942, the 1st Parachute Brigade was in action as part of Operation *Torch*, the invasion on North Africa, where it earned a fearsome reputation from the Germans who endured relentless attacks from this new force.

As Airborne Forces grew, so did the size of the battles they were involved in. From brigade attacks during the North African campaign, they progressed to operating at division strength in Sicily in July 1943. Having fought through Italy, the majority returned to the United Kingdom before returning to the Continent and earning battle honours at Normandy, Arnhem, the Ardennes and the Rhine Crossing.

At the heart of the two airborne divisions that were formed by the end of the war were the men. They had to have the ability to think and act for themselves during battle as there was no guarantee that, having jumped into enemy territory, they would land with their officers and NCOs. They therefore had to have the capability not only to find the rendezvous point and see the mission through, but to deal with any situation they might encounter en route.

CHRONOLOGY

1940

22 June

Churchill calls for 5,000 airborne troops.

13 July

First experimental parachute jumps are carried out.

25 July

First fatal casualty following a parachute jump.

21 November

No. 2 Commando changes its name to 11 SAS.

3 December

First parachute exercise takes place in the presence of the Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces.

1941

10 February

11 SAS raids the Tragino Aqueduct.

9 July

Sqn. Ldr. Maurice Newnham DSO takes over command of the Parachute Training School at RAF Ringway.

12 July

Lt. Col. Ernest Down takes over as CO of 11 SAS.

31 August

1st Parachute Brigade formed.

15 September

11 SAS changes its name to 1st Parachute Battalion.

1 October

Training school authorized to be set up in New Delhi, India.

1942

27–28 February

Operation *Biting*, the raid on Bruneval.

17 July

2nd Parachute Brigade formed.

29 July

Army Council Instruction 1596 authorizes the wearing of the maroon beret.

1 August

Parachute Regiment formed.

5 November

3rd Parachute Brigade formed.

8 November

Operation Torch begins in North Africa.

12 November

3rd Parachute Battalion attacks Bone Airfield.

24 November

1st Parachute Battalion fights the battle of Soudia.

25 December

The War Office approves War Establishment for Depot at Hardwick Hall.

29 December–3 January

2nd Parachute Battalion fights the Battle of Oudna.

1943

3–6 January

3rd Parachute Battalion fights the battle of Djebel Azzag.

3–4 February

1st Parachute Battalion fights the battle of Djebel Alliliga.

26 February

1st and 3rd Parachute Battalions fight the battle of El Hadjeba.

5–15 March

1st, 2nd and 3rd Parachute Battalions fight the battle of Tamera.

20–24 March

1st and 3rd Parachute Battalions fight the battle of Djebel Dahra.

27–29 March

1st, 2nd and 3rd Parachute Battalions fight the battle of Kef El Debna.

23 April

6th Airborne Division formed.

10 July

Allied forces begin attack on Sicily.

13–18 July

1st Parachute Brigade attacks Primosole Bridge.

9 September

1st Airborne Division lands at Taranto, Italy.

1944

6 June

Allied Forces land at Normandy. 7th Parachute Battalion later awarded battle honour for Pegasus Bridge; 9th Parachute Battalion awarded battle honour for Merville Battery.

10–13	9th and 12th Parachute Battalions fight at the battle of Bréville.
17–20 August	7th, 8th, 9th, 12th and 13th Parachute Battalions fight at the battle of Dives Crossing.
15–28 August	2nd Independent Parachute Brigade takes part in Operation Dragoon in Southern France.
22–23 August	7th, 8th, 12th and 13th Parachute Battalions fight at the battle of La Touques Crossing.
17–27 September	Men of 1st Airborne Division fight the battle of Arnhem. Lieutenant John 'Jack' Grayburn and Capt. Lionel Queripel are each awarded the Victoria Cross for their part in the battle.
12 October	Men of 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade paratroop into Greece.
2 December–15 January	Men of 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade take part in the battle of Athens as civil war breaks out in Greece.
1945	
3–14 January	13th Parachute Battalion fights at the battle of Ourthe, Ardennes.
24 March–1 April	6th Airborne Division takes part in Operation <i>Varsity</i> , the Rhine Crossing.
8 May	Nazi Germany formally surrenders.
9 May	The first men from 1st Airborne Division land to liberate Norway as part of Operation <i>Doomsday</i> .
2 September	Japan formally surrenders.

RECRUITMENT

Having made the decision to form an Airborne Force of 5,000 men, the question was how was it to be done? This led to two important decisions being made during the early stages that would impact upon recruiting. Firstly, all men joining would be volunteers; no man would be forced to jump from an aircraft. Secondly, the new force would be stocked with experienced soldiers; each man would learn the basic skills and drills of soldiery at his original unit before transferring. During World War II, soldiers could not enlist directly into The Parachute Regiment; this option did not exist until the 1950s.

The first step for the recruiters was to advertise the need for volunteers. Posters went up around barracks across the country calling for those interested to apply to transfer to the new Airborne Forces. Later, publicity stunts were used to advertise The Parachute Regiment as an opportunity for soldiers. For example, CSM Stewart of the 2nd Parachute Brigade and his team, complete with ball, parachuted in to play a game of football in Italy, which was well covered in newspapers.

This advertising was seen by men like Pte. Ronald Gear, who was serving at the time in 1st Battalion the Hampshire Regiment, and who soon requested permission to transfer. Private Gear had already shown interest in doing something different as his application to join shows that he had previously volunteered for the Special Services Brigade.

There were a great variety of reasons why a soldier volunteered to become a paratrooper, and each man coming forward needed to be assessed to ensure



Success stories such as Bruneval gave the British public hope at a time during the war when morale was low, while the widespread reporting of the raid also helped with the recruitment of new paratroopers.

that he had the right mentality to see him through the tough physical training that lay ahead. Resources were tight, and so those doing the selecting had to ensure that they only accepted those men who were likely to succeed. Lieutenant-Colonel M. Henniker was a founder member of the Dungeon Party, the HQ of the newly formed Airborne Division (later renamed 1st Airborne Division), and was given the task of selecting potential recruits for the new division. He came to the conclusion that there were several categories for volunteers. Amongst those who failed to make the recruitment process were the 'Flash Alf' who volunteered for his own ego, the inferiority complex, the unhappy marriage and the man who tried everything but could never stick to it. The man Lt. Col. Henniker wanted was 'the man who wanted nothing, but who felt he could give something'.

From those who did succeed a number of reasons are given for having joined. The main response given by veterans is the extra two shillings a day pay, which compensated them for the additional danger of parachuting. Others reasoned that, if they were to fight, they wanted to know that the man next to them was the best, not someone who was forced to be there. Some cite the inactivity of their parent unit in barracks in the UK, and the longing for adventure or to fight and win the war. Others simply give the reason that their friends were joining and they wished to remain together. Sergeant Donald Dean was one volunteer. His unit had been disbanded so he was sent to Italy as a reinforcement assigned to the Queen's Royal Regiment, who had been in action for four months by the time of his arrival. As an unknown reinforcement he was given the role of stretcher-bearer, and it was while serving in this role that he 'had an argument with an 88mm shell. The shell won'. Following his recovery, he heard that recruiters were calling for volunteers for special service units. Donald made a calculated decision: he had not found comradeship in the exhausted unit he had been posted to, and he knew that with new reinforcements the situation was unlikely to improve, so he volunteered and eventually joined the 4th Parachute Battalion.

A

THE BRUNEVAL PARA, FEBRUARY 1942

The first battle honour earned by The Parachute Regiment was achieved by C Coy, 2nd Parachute Battalion for their raid on the *Würzburg* radar station at Bruneval on the northern coast of France. The objective was to capture and hold the radar station long enough for Flt. Sgt. Charles Cox, an RAF technician, to obtain the required intelligence. They were then to withdraw to the beach and be picked up by the Royal Navy. On the motor launch that took the party home, many of the men were still dressed in the step-in smocks they wore to parachute in; these were designed to avoid any loose items getting caught up when jumping. It was not usual for a corporal to wear a pistol holster, but this particular Para did so because he had been given a special task, perhaps to act as bodyguard for Flt. Sgt. Cox. The orders were that on no account must Flt. Sgt. Cox fall into enemy hands. If the situation was in doubt, he was to be shot by the Paras.

In addition to the pistol, the Para has a German helmet hooked on to his belt. It was not uncommon for soldiers to pick up souvenirs during their operations, and the helmet taken at Bruneval is still held by The Parachute Regiment to this day.

Around the Para is displayed a range of equipment typically used: the SMLE Mk. III rifle, bayonet and bandoleer (1); Webley Mk. VI revolver (2); whistle (3); No. 18 wireless set front and rear (4); Celanese scarf (5); X-type parachute (6); and knee pads (7).





Many soldiers saw joining the Paras as something glamorous and different. They aspired to be like these officers from the 22nd Independent Parachute Company (Pathfinders) about to board an Albemarle aircraft. By the end of June 1944, the captain on the left was later killed in action; testimony to the dangerous nature of the Paras' work.

Although all the volunteers were trained soldiers, they came from many different backgrounds. Some were experienced pre-war professional soldiers; others had volunteered to join for the duration or had even been conscripted. Men came from different social backgrounds, from the poorest streets of the East End of London to great wealthy country estates. Some had never left their home town before joining; others were experienced men of the world.

The first four battalions of what became The Parachute Regiment were filled using men who had volunteered

as individuals; however, as the regiment grew it became apparent that not enough men were coming forward in the time required. The decision was therefore taken to convert other infantry battalions, such as 10th Battalion the Green Howards who would become the 12th (Yorkshire) Parachute Battalion. The men of the 10th Green Howards were paraded and given a choice to volunteer or be transferred to another unit. All those who volunteered still needed to meet the physical and mental requirements of joining the Paras, but the incentive to stay with friends and colleagues was a strong inducement to see it through. The places of those who didn't volunteer or complete the training were filled with volunteers from other units.

As The Parachute Regiment developed, its ethos and reputation began to attract men – it was seen as something different, something distinctive; this was battle for the modern age. Items such as the Denison smock and maroon beret became iconic markers of this difference, and young men wanted to be part of it. The recruiting officer needed to ensure that the potential recruit knew that behind the glamour of the badge there was hard, sometimes dangerous physical training ahead of him, in order that time and money were not wasted. It is recorded that around three-quarters of those who applied to join were rejected. As well as being interviewed, men had to pass a medical examination and a series of physical tests, such as boxing a three-minute round with gloves and completing a forced march of eight miles in one hour 15 minutes.

TRAINING

The men selected for training had already completed basic training within the British Army; however, they now needed to be turned into paratroopers and for that they required the strength, drive and determination to fight through any obstacle put in their way. The training was physically and mentally tough in order to sift out the weak and build the strong into an unstoppable force.

The concept of military parachuting was still new to the UK during this era. As a consequence procedures, equipment and aircraft were continually being adapted as a result of the lessons learned from previous jumps. Parachute course reports kept a careful tally of injuries sustained and, where patterns

emerged, the training was changed to compensate and those changes noted.

The first experimental jumps began on 13 July 1940, with some of the earliest jumps completed from Armstrong Whitworth Whitley bombers which had been withdrawn from front-line service. At first these required the jumper to crawl on his hands and knees to the rear of the aircraft to a platform where the rear gun turret had previously been. Standing on the platform, the jumper would pull the D ring to release his parachute, which in turn would drag him off the platform and into the slipstream of the aircraft. This procedure was found to be too slow for military parachuting, so a different harness was developed to allow jumping from a static line.

When training began it was hampered by a lack of suitable aircraft, with only four Whitley Mk. IIs dedicated to the task. It soon became a rare event to have all four of these aircraft serviceable at any one time. At this time there was a shortage of aircraft across the board and the RAF did not see the untested Airborne Forces as a priority. Gradually, more aircraft became available for use by the Paras and new techniques were developed for different types of aircraft, such as the Douglas Dakota with its side door rather than the aperture in the floor of the Whitley.

Two main locations stand out for Para training in World War II: Hardwick Hall and RAF Ringway, the latter now more commonly known as Manchester International Airport. All Paras trained in the UK during this period passed through these two locations, while those trained abroad at parachute schools in the Middle East, India and Italy would often complete refresher courses at RAF Ringway on their return to the United Kingdom.



Men prepare to jump out of the hole in the floor of a Whitley. This method of exit resulted in many Paras of the day 'ringing the bell', or breaking their nose on the rim of the aperture cut into the floor of the Whitleys used for parachuting.



Men march towards awaiting Whitleys, ready to undertake training jumps at RAF Ringway. The airfield would become the centre for parachute training during this period, with many of the new operational techniques developed at this location.



A 'stick' of men with their parachute jump instructor having completed their training at RAF Ringway. Each man has a girlfriend's name on his Sorbo helmet for luck – except for one who has two girls' names.

Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, an Elizabethan country house which at the time was part of the Chatsworth Estate owned by the Duke of Devonshire, became the depot from 1941. Army Northern Command had leased some 53 acres from the duke and built a camp of red-brick huts to the south-west of the hall.

As the Airborne Forces grew this camp came to house the Depot Company, Pre-Para Training Company, Holding Company, Battle School, an ATS admin wing and a small medical centre. It was here that potential recruits to The Parachute Regiment completed their ground training. This was a physically demanding period of training which ensured that only the fittest men proceeded to parachute training.

The move to Hardwick Hall also saw the emergence of a specific philosophy that came to be known as 'airborne initiative'. In recent years, one of the lakes in the grounds has been nicknamed 'Bicycle Lake' because of the large number of bicycles found at the bottom and dating from the era when the Paras were based there. Investigations found that this was as a result of Paras using airborne initiative to find a means of transport to return to camp after a night out in town. Airborne initiative was a key skill that all Paras needed to develop as the instructors were looking for men who were able to think for themselves. The results of airborne initiative can be seen in a demonstration held for royalty and other VIPs in 1940. Having landed safely, the men headed for the objective, with one section 'borrowing' the smartest car in the car park to reach it. It was only later in the day that the car was reunited with its owner, HRH Crown Prince Olav of Norway, who arrived at the objective having covered the several miles of muddy ground on foot.

Training saw the potential Paras outside in the field from 6am to 10pm, except for meal times and the Sunday church parade. The church parade

provided a welcome break for some during the busy training period. One paratrooper recalled: 'I was told that, on Sunday, a Church Parade would be taking place for those of the Church of England faith, but Catholics would have to make their own way to Church in Chesterfield. That suited me fine, so I promptly changed what little religion I had to the Catholic faith ... for a half a day in Chesterfield'

Whilst at Hardwick Hall the soldiers were expected to double everywhere. Physical training was a key part of daily life and the programme included a mix of unarmed combat, boxing, abseiling in the quarry, assault course, gymnastics and cross-country running. The final fitness test at Hardwick Hall was a 10-mile forced march in two hours over tough terrain designed to test the men in terms of fitness, stamina and endurance.

Having completed their ground training, soldiers would speed-march the 50 miles from Hardwick Hall to RAF Ringway for the next stage in their training. For the man arriving at Ringway this could be a nervous time. Air travel was in its infancy; and for many of those undertaking parachute training their first jump would also be their first experience of flying. Added to this, the much-altered aircraft and developmental kit did not always fill those training with confidence. Unlike their American counterparts, British Paras were not issued with reserve parachutes, thus ensuring that any mistakes were likely to be fatal ones.

The Central Landing Establishment at RAF Ringway dated back to September 1940, but soon grew to include a Development Unit, Glider Training Squadron and importantly for future Paras, the Parachute Training School. Squadron Leader Maurice Newnham DSO was given command of the new Parachute Training School in 1941, including the task of setting it up and developing the training programme. By 1942, Newnham was reporting that 300–400 men could arrive on a Sunday and a fortnight later would have completed their course and be ready to leave to join their new units.



Two fellow recruits pull their colleague along the floor as they practise drag training at RAF Ringway in one of the hangars used for synthetic training. They are wearing the Sorbo training helmet and are dressed in step-in smocks that were developed during this period for British paratroopers.



A recruit prepares to use the swing in one of the hangars at RAF Ringway. Exercises such as this not only prepared the recruits technically, but also began to break down any fear they might have.

Men board the balloon cage. Introduced because of a shortage of aircraft, the balloon cage offered a more controlled environment and was used during training for the recruits' first jumps.



During the early days at the Parachute Training School, instructors from both the Army and RAF were used to teach parachuting. However, as training progressed and experience was gained, it became clear that experience in the art of parachuting was not necessarily enough in itself. The decision, therefore, was made to draw instructors from the RAF Physical Training Branch.

As part of this process of creating a more professional process of training, an RAF officer conducted a lengthy scientific study of parachuting in order to draw up simple techniques that could easily be taught and would reduce the risk of injury. This review in effect took training from a cottage industry to the factory production of qualified paratroopers.

On arrival at RAF Ringway men would be divided into 'sticks' of ten men, with a sergeant instructor in charge of each stick. In each course syndicate there would be around eight sticks of men, with an officer instructor in charge of the whole syndicate. The course was expected to last two to three weeks, depending on weather conditions.

The first step in the process for the potential paratrooper was ground training. Synthetic training in the hangars evolved during this period, with many different ideas being developed to teach and prepare the men for jumping. Teaching and experimenting during this period went hand in hand, with the necessity of creating a large-scale force driving development. The system of ground training was developed by Wg. Cdr. John C. Kilkenny OBE, who was the Chief Instructor at the Parachute Training School for four years. His task was to teach, on the ground, the actions the paratrooper must take from first jumping to falling and then to landing to ensure that he arrived safely on the ground ready to fight.

Two hangars at RAF Ringway were converted into gymnasias with equipment for synthetic training. The first hangar contained fuselages of the different aircraft types used and examples of their doors and apertures for exiting, thus enabling the trainee to learn how to exit the aircraft. The second hangar contained a number of different apparatus, such as trapeze swings and slides, which simulated different points in the jump that required different techniques. This included the fan jump: a steel cable on a drum connected to the parachute harness worn by the trainee. The trainee would stand on a 25ft-high platform and then jump. The fan created an air brake, thereby slowing the trainee before he landed. During training the trainees were taught the correct drills in the event of finding

themselves in difficulty whilst in the air, such as entangled rigging lines. However, it was the landing that was considered the most hazardous part of the jump, with the potential of causing significant injury if the right drills were not carried out correctly.

Not all of the ideas formulated for synthetic training were as successful as others. Devices such as the 'Gallows' were invented whereby the man was suspended in his harness attached to a piece of rope with a counterweight at the end. The man would then jump through an aperture and drop until his weight was checked by the counterweight, thereby simulating the shock of leaving the aircraft. However, training was stopped on this piece of equipment due to the number of leg and ankle injuries that resulted. Another idea was to have the men jump from moving lorries to practise their landing drills. Again, the number of leg and ankle injuries sustained during these jumps proved too high for this to continue. The practice of jumping from moving vehicles was, however, continued in the training of parachute dogs (Paradogs), which were used for guarding and patrol work.

The men were expected to complete eight jumps in order to qualify for their wings, with the skill level required gradually increasing from one jump to the next. These jumps began with the basic jump from a balloon cage, which had the advantage that the instructor could speak to the trainees through a loudspeaker as they descended. The balloon had been introduced in the early days in part due to a lack of suitable aircraft available for training, and those men who were already parachute trained met it with some scepticism. However, Lt. Tony Hibbert of the 1st Parachute Battalion led by example and jumped from the new balloon in full mess dress and spurs between drinks and the starter being served in the officers' mess. Many men found the balloon jump the most nerve-wracking part of the training as they were more conscious of the landscape around them and had more time to think about the jump as the process was so slow. Not all men managed to jump, and, as it was believed that once a man refused to jump he was likely to do so again, they were therefore returned to unit as unfit for parachute service. During training, persuasion was not used by the instructors; the men had to make the choice to jump freely. If, however, they refused to jump after they qualified, it was treated as a court-martial offence as they had failed in their duties.

Following the balloon jump, the men would begin jumping



An early paratrooper adopts the correct jumping position on exiting the aircraft over Tatton Park in Cheshire. Adopting the correct position was important to ensure the paratrooper did not become tangled up or hung up under the aircraft.



A parachute instructor collapses his parachute at Tatton Park. Strong winds on a drop zone could lead to a Para being dragged if he was not prepared to deal with the conditions.



Once men had learned the basics of jumping, they were taught to form up ready to face any threat. Men were at their most vulnerable as they dropped, landed and took off their parachute.

which allowed the parachute canopy to deploy, in turn checking the trainees' fall. It was important that the trainees learned to exit the aircraft with speed; the slower the exit, the greater the distance they would land from one another on the ground. In enemy territory this could prove fatal, leaving men at both ends exposed and necessitating a longer tab to the rendezvous point.

As the training course progressed, the number of men in a stick would be increased, followed by the addition of carrying kit. Additional weight underneath the parachute increased the risk of injury on landing. It was therefore essential that the trainees were able to carry out their drills correctly. The final jump required them to jump with full kit at night. The inability to see the ground made this a more challenging jump, as the trainee had to judge the point at which he would come into contact with the ground. By May 1943, the requirement to successfully complete eight jumps was cut to five jumps due to the shortage of suitable aircraft.

During this period a number of different aircraft types were used, with different techniques required for each variant. The Whitley Mk. III bomber was converted by cutting a hole in the floor from which the men would make their jump. This led to a common injury amongst parachutists of this era known as 'ringing the bell'. Having reached the hole they would sit with their legs over it before pushing themselves off. If they failed to push off sufficiently,

from aircraft in small sticks in clean fatigues, i.e. without a kit bag. The men would be hooked up to the line inside the aircraft and await the green light. On approaching the drop zone the pilot would throttle back in order to fly as slowly as possible without stalling the aircraft. Ideally, the aircraft would be flying at no more than 100mph, although men were known to have jumped from aircraft flying at more than this speed. When the light turned green the trainees would exit the aircraft, being blown into the slipstream where they would fall for a second before the strop line tightened

B

GROUND TRAINING AT RAF RINGWAY

RAF Ringway housed the Parachute Training School. Before the new trainees began their parachute jumps, they first had to complete synthetic ground training to teach them the different techniques required for parachuting, such as how to absorb the impact of the fall and how to land on the parts of the body best suited for absorbing that shock. During this part of training they would perfect the art of keeping their legs together and rolling on landing, thereby minimizing the risk of injury. This was a time of development, as the school learned how best to train parachutists and developed new techniques.

Two hangars housed various apparatus that took the trainees through a series of exercises to prepare them. In this hangar, the blocks were used to teach them how to jump and roll from an increasing height. The parachute harnesses on swings dangled the wearer above the ground, allowing him to practise actions required in the air.





Parachute training in the Middle East: an instructor demonstrates how to fit the parachute harness. Parachute schools such as the one at RAF Ramat David in Palestine were essential in converting battalions already abroad into parachute battalions.

the parachute on their back would catch the rim of the hole. This would cause their face to go forward and collide with the edge of the hole, thereby breaking their nose or 'ringing the bell'. Other aircraft such as the Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle were also used for parachuting during this period. As parachuting progressed, aircraft such as the Douglas Dakota changed the way men could parachute. Instead of a hole in the floor the Dakota had a side-door from which the jump could be made, and enough headroom inside for the men to stand prior to jumping, thereby allowing a quicker exit.

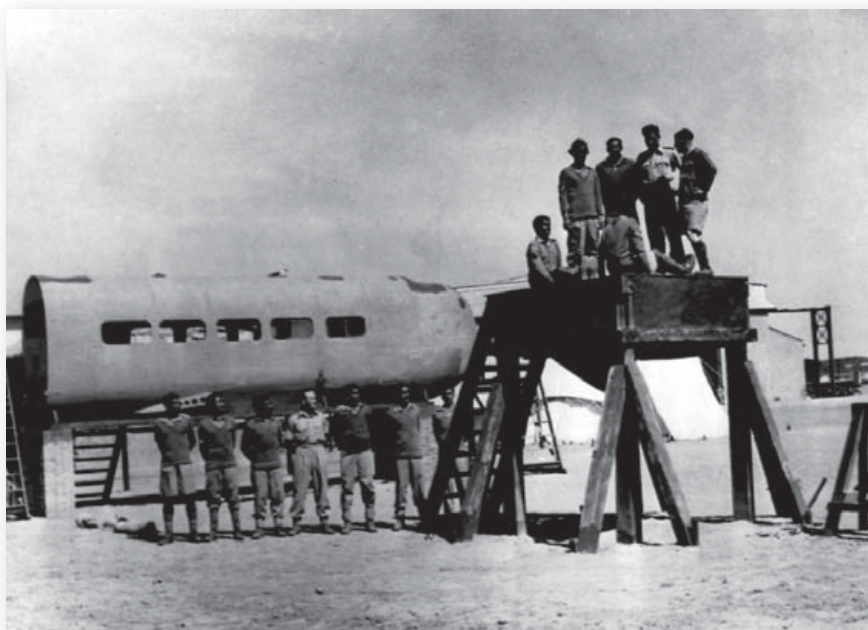
Accidents did occur, especially in the early experimental days. Most often they resulted simply in sprained ankles or broken legs, but on occasion they could prove fatal when parachutes 'candled' having failed to open or become tangled. One Para, Fred Moore, recounts watching a demonstration jump by some Polish Paras:

We could see the hole at the bottom of the fuselage, from which the paratroopers would emerge. One after the other, they came out, in textbook fashion

and then, to our horror, two came out locked together. Jumping from opposite sides to the hole, instead of jumping alternatively they had emerged simultaneously, with the consequence that although their chutes initially opened, the rigging lines wrapped around each other, the chutes collapsed and the two bodies hitting the ground at a high velocity were killed instantly.



Men practise jumping from an old Lockheed Hudson aircraft frame during ground training at RAF Kabrit in Egypt. Note the different over smocks worn; the light ones were made in India, the dark ones were made in the United Kingdom.



Indian units were trained with British instructors at the Airlanding School in New Delhi from October 1941. Casualty rates were far higher than at RAF Ringway, leading to an inspection by Wing Commander Maurice Newnham DSO who found shortcomings in the maintenance of the X-type parachutes.

As early as 25 July 1940 a parachuting fatality was recorded. At RAF Ringway, all trained parachutists who witnessed an accident would be made to jump immediately, irrespective of their experience level or position. It was believed that any delay in jumping after witnessing an accident could cause a man to refuse to jump again.

The fast expansion of military parachuting led to a need for parachuting schools to be set up around the world to help meet the demand. It simply was not practical to take units or men already abroad back to the UK to train before redeploying them. Whilst RAF Ringway remained the centre of excellence for parachuting, schools were set up in India, the Middle East and, later in the war, the Mediterranean. These schools were not always as well equipped as the Parachute Training School at RAF Ringway.

Donald Dean was one of the men to go through training at the Lido Di Roma in Italy. Having volunteered, his arrival at the depot was delayed due to a lack of training staff. When he did finally arrive, the staff explained that the equipment at their disposal was rather ad hoc, having been made by either themselves or the Royal Engineers. There were also differences in the training programme. As there was no balloon, the first jumps would take place directly from an aircraft. A number of those trained abroad subsequently retook short courses at RAF Ringway on their return to the United Kingdom.

Having completed their parachute course, training would continue within the battalions, honing the skills required for airborne operations and bringing the men together into a functioning unit. Some of the earliest pictures of the Paras show 11 SAS training in 1941, planning and storming Norwich Castle. This was part of an exercise conducted in Norfolk and Suffolk, under the then commanding officer Lt. Col. Ernest 'Dracula' Down. Since Down's taking over as CO, the men had seen their training intensify as he developed the unit for its specialized role. The exercise had started with platoon tactics in Suffolk, before the storming of Norwich Castle and concluded with manoeuvres with Canadian troops around Redhill in Surrey and Biggin Hill in Kent.

Three men from No. 2 Commando take part in a training exercise at Norwich Castle. They are armed with SMLE Mk. III rifles and Bren submachine guns, and are wearing early step-in smocks and side-lacing boots copied from the German *Fallschirmjäger*.



Fuel rationing led to some transport issues, with a great deal of fuel being required to get men around the country to take part in different exercises. One solution was to get the men to tab between the different locations. Fred Moore recalls how, after one training exercise in Exford in Somerset, ‘we marched back with full pack to Bulford [in Wiltshire], a distance of 110 miles, in just over three days. Each night when we stopped, we were some distance from the nearest pub, to which most everyone journeyed, so that the actual distance covered was much more than the registered length’.

As they became an established force it became apparent that the skills and techniques within the Airborne Forces differed from those of the regular infantry. As a consequence of this a need was identified for a battle school specifically for Airborne Forces, where senior NCOs and officers could gain further training in their role and benefit from the experience gained in operations. The decision was therefore taken to create a battle school at Hardwick Hall in 1942. The school was able to make use of the Derwent Valley and the moors owned by the Duke of Devonshire for training. By March 1944, with Hardwick Hall under increasing pressure due to the number of trainees passing through the facilities, the battle/tactical school was moved to Dore and Totley.

APPEARANCE AND EQUIPMENT

Having brought a new force into existence, the next problem was how to dress and equip it. Within this period, the appearance of the paratrooper changed as uniform and equipment developed to meet the demands of the new Airborne Force. From the start it was apparent that this new force would have different requirements from the normal infantryman, with the result that the criteria used for the design of both uniform and equipment



A Para wearing a 'Flash Gordon' training helmet, so named because of its similarity to helmets worn in the film of the same name. Note the scratches to his face, which may have been caused when the wind took hold of the parachute after jumping, leading to the man being dragged.

therefore differed. Consideration needed to be given as to how any piece of uniform or equipment would function under parachute, how it could be deployed onto the battlefield, and how portable it would be once on the ground.

For inspiration on how to tackle this, the designers turned to the enemy. The uniforms and equipment of the German *Fallschirmjäger* had by this stage been produced in factories for a number of years and had been tested not only in exercises but also through battle. It is not unsurprising therefore that some of the first items issued to the British force bore an uncanny resemblance to enemy uniform. The first British step-in smock (in storeman's terms 'jacket parachutists') issued was virtually a direct copy of the German *Knochensack*. Having realized that the standard-issue British helmet with its brim was not suitable for parachuting, the German helmet was used as inspiration for a British design which resembled a dispatch rider's helmet in shape.

Following the formation of the Central Landing Establishment at RAF Ringway in September 1940, a Technical Development Section was formed in order to trial new uniform and equipment; this later became the Airborne Forces Experimental Establishment. Inspiration for new items came from the most unlikely sources. Following a number of head injuries a new safety helmet made from rubber was introduced for practice jumps. Legend has it that the design for the new helmet was inspired by the film *Flash Gordon*, hence the helmet being commonly referred to as a 'Flash Gordon'. This helmet was not used for long before being replaced by the Sorbo helmet for practice jumps. This helmet too was made from rubber, by a company called Sorbo, and was described in *By Air to Battle* (a Ministry of Information film from 1945) as 'a flat circular cheese'.

The earliest photos of the Paras show them wearing their original regiment/corps headdress. However, by July 1942 the maroon beret was authorized. The origins of the association of the colours maroon and light



When The Parachute Regiment cap badge was first introduced in 1943, the men of the 1st Airborne Division were in Italy. Units were issued with moulds and the men had to find scrap metal to make their own badge. Up until this point they had worn an Army Air Corps cap badge.

blue with the Airborne Forces are unclear. One story suggests that they were the choice of the novelist Daphne du Maurier, who was married to Maj. Gen. Frederick Browning. It is said that when he asked her, she replied that she liked the colours his horses raced in. Sadly, a letter exists in the Airborne Assault Archive written by Daphne du Maurier stating that the story is untrue. She goes on in the letter to state that she likes the myth so much that she hoped the story would continue to be told for many years to come.

The Parachute Regiment cap badge was introduced in 1943, replacing the Army Air Corps cap badge which had been worn up until then. The new cap badge was an important symbol, marking The Parachute Regiment out as a unit in its own right. Another important symbol was the introduction of the famous Parachute wings which helped to build *esprit de corps*. The badge is thought to originate from the GQ Company, which, along with the Irvins Company, manufactured the static-line X-type parachute during the war. Following the end of a course, GQ would give each man a small GQ pin to attach to his chest. This pin was soon replaced by a cloth badge, indicating that the man was a trained parachutist. The badge was then moved to the top of the right-hand sleeve to avoid confusion with RAF pilots, although some pictures from Indian units show that this order may not have reached everyone.

The X-type parachute was developed in 1940 and became the standard parachute for the British Army during the course of World War II. Unlike their American counterparts, the British Army did not use a reserve parachute during this period, trusting instead in the reliability of the X-type parachute. The X-type consisted of four separate parts: the parachute, the inner bag, the outer pack and the harness. The parachute itself had a canopy of 714cm

diameter, with 28 rigging lines each 7.6 metres long and made alternatively of silk, cotton (Ramex), and nylon.

Of all the items that make up the paratrooper's uniform, the most iconic must be the Denison smock. Trained in 1941, it became general issue to Airborne Forces in 1942 and was worn over the top of battledress. For parachuting, an over smock was issued from 1942 to be worn over the top of the Denison smock; this replaced the earlier step-in smock and was a sleeveless garment designed to stop any items of field equipment from becoming snagged on the rigging lines.

Over the years, many have attributed the creation of the Denison smock to a mythical 'Major Denison'. However, despite extensive research carried out for the book *Denison* (Military Mode Publishing, 2013), no Major Denison could be found who fitted this timeframe. A more likely reason for its name was a corruption of the word denim, as references to 'smock denim' exist from this period.

Unlike the greatcoat issued to other troops, the Denison smock was made from a lighter denim material and, unusually for 1942, it was camouflaged. In 1942 it was the first mass issue of a standard disruptive patterned uniform in the British Army. The Denison smocks of the period are commonly referred to as the '42 pattern and '44 pattern smocks, the main difference being the absence of the knitted cuff on the '44 pattern Denison smock – a wartime economy measure. To the expert eye, however, there are more variants during this period, with changes such as the camouflage pattern and differences between manufacturers. In addition, it was not uncommon for unofficial alterations to be made by the individual, such as adding the top of a sock on to the cuff of the '44 pattern Denison smock in order to simulate the knitted cuff of the '42 pattern version. Not all alterations were as common: one story tells of a European royal family's fur collection being 'liberated' to line the inside of some enterprising Paras' smocks.



WAFs were responsible for packing the X-type parachutes at RAF Ringway. Behind them a sign bears the grim warning: 'Remember, every parachute you pack is a man's life'. This was a skilled job; a badly packed parachute could result in the parachute not deploying properly, potentially costing a man's life.

From left to right, Captain Ronnie Stark, Lt. John Brayley and Maj. Richard Ashford (later killed in action) of A Coy, 2nd Parachute Battalion, stand in the Beja area of Tunisia in 1943. Note the Fairbairn-Sykes dagger on Maj. Ashford's first pattern parachutist's trousers. These trousers were a version of the '37 pattern standard issue modified at unit level.



The legacy of the Denison smock continues to the present day in the nickname 'the Red Devils'. In North Africa in 1942, local Arabs nicknamed the paratroopers 'men with tails' due to the Denison smock having a 'tail' that could be attached between the legs whilst parachuting in order to keep the smock in place. The area they were fighting in at the time consisted of a red dirt, which soon coated the men from head to toe. The Germans soon became aware of this new enemy, who came out of nowhere and fought with great ferocity. It was not long before intelligence was picking up German communications that *Die Rote Teufeln* or 'Red Devils' were in the area.



THE NORMANDY PARA, JUNE 1944

By 6 June 1944, The Parachute Regiment had become established, its ranks had swelled and its battalions were split across the two airborne divisions. On D-Day, members of the 6th Airborne Division would lead the invasion of Northwest Europe, sending the first troops to liberate the French.

When the Para jumped he carried as much equipment with him as possible, as resupply or coming across equipment containers could not be guaranteed. On his person he carried some equipment and weapons that were the same as those for the rest of the British Army, such as the '37 pattern webbing (1). Other items, such as the Fairbairn-Sykes dagger (2), were carried by more specialized units such as the Commandos and SAS. The Para carried the dagger in a special pocket in the parachutist's battledress trousers, designed to allow him access to cut himself free if he became caught on items such as trees when landing. The toggle rope was also issued to these specialized units (3); these could be used to pull items and be linked together to help climb over obstacles. The No. 82 Grenade, more commonly known as the Gammon Bomb (4), was not only used by members of The Parachute Regiment, but was invented by one of its officers, Capt. Jock Gammon of the 1st Parachute Battalion.

Some Paras were issued Medical Research Council (MRC) body armour (5) during Operation *Overlord*, which was worn under the Denison smock. Made from manganese steel, MRC body armour consisted of three plates: chest, lower belly or 'goolie', and a rear plate that partially covered the lower back and kidneys. The body armour proved unpopular at the time as it caused chaffing and the wearer to sweat, and it was quickly discarded or swapped by the men.



Two paratroopers with a PIAT in North Africa. Note the use of the scrim scarf and scrimmed helmet to disrupt shape. The PIAT was a handheld weapon that could be used in an anti-tank role. It weighed 15kg, had a heavy recoil, a short range and was slow to reload, added to which it was ineffective against the front armour of heavier tanks.



A message from the time sent by Maj. Gen. Browning to the 1st Parachute Brigade congratulates the men, stating that ‘such distinctions given by the enemy are seldom won in battle except by the finest fighting troops’.

Another notable difference between the Para and normal infantryman was the issue of ‘trousers parachutists’ based on the standard-issue ’37 pattern battledress trousers with some variations. The main features were a large thigh pocket lined with chamois leather that was securely fastened with press studs; and a pocket or attachment for the Fairbairn-Sykes dagger, positioned to allow access if the Para became entangled in trees during a jump. On some patterns there were two pockets on the rear for shell dressings, which also provided the added benefit of extra padding on a bad landing.

A variety of weapons were produced to cover the range of combat situations a Para could find himself in, ranging in size from the Fairbairn-Sykes dagger to the projector infantry anti-tank weapon (PIAT). The Fairbairn-Sykes dagger was named after its designers, Mr William Fairbairn and Mr Eric Sykes – two gentlemen who had served together in the Shanghai Police and taken a considerable interest in street-fighting in the city. Returning to the UK, they put their knowledge to use by designing a programme of unarmed combat for the British Army. For armed combat, the wartime Para had a number of weapons at his disposal, such as the Lee Enfield No. 4 Rifle. The Sten submachine gun also proved popular for parachuting due to its detachable stock, with the Mk. V becoming standard issue to Airborne Forces from 1944. Unlike the Lee Enfield No. 4 Rifle, which required a weapons valise for parachuting, the Sten gun could be tucked between the straps of the paratrooper’s harness, thereby allowing the weapon to be deployed quickly on landing.

At section level, the .303in. Bren light machine gun was used. With a 30-round magazine and a range of up to 550yds when used with its bipod, it proved a highly effective weapon. At first the Bren, along with other

heavier weapons, was dropped by container, but as techniques developed the leg bag was designed. Other, larger weapons carried included the PIAT and the 3in. mortar.

One of the problems for those planning this new force was how to deploy the equipment they would require, and then how to sustain the paratroopers once they were in place. An individual Para can only carry a certain amount of weight by parachute, and increased weight carries an increased risk of injury to the Para on landing. The Container Light Equipment (CLE) was developed to be dropped at the same time as the men, as well as later in the battle to provide resupply. The CLE was equipped with its own parachute and a crash pan on the bottom to act as a shock absorber on landing. It was designed to fit the standard bomb racks of any Allied aircraft and had colour-coded parachutes to identify the items inside. For example, CLEs carrying medical supplies would have a different-colour parachute to those carrying ammunition, thereby allowing the soldier on the ground to prioritize based on need. The colouring would change with each battle to confuse the enemy. However, there remained the issue that the CLE could be difficult to find in close country – exactly when men needed immediate access to their weaponry. In 1942, Maj. John Lander, who had by this time two years of parachuting experience, is credited with the development of the leg bag method that allowed up to 100lb of weight to be attached to the paratrooper. The paratrooper jumped with the leg bag, and then allowed it to drop on a rope attached to him once out of the aircraft. This meant that the leg bag would land first, thus reducing the weight that the paratrooper landed with. Major Lander not only came up with a number of different items of equipment, but also developed the concept of pathfinders. These men would go in first to mark the drop zones using items such as the Eureka beacon, thereby allowing the main body to jump more accurately; they also provided basic security to the area. Major Lander's work was cut short when he was



Paras in 'Flash Gordon' training helmets carry a container to an awaiting aircraft. The development of containers allowed heavier items to be landed as well as allowing resupply from the air.



Injured personnel from RAF Ringway take exercise on the beach at Southport as part of their rehabilitation. What appear to be white vests are actually plaster casts, most likely due to back injuries following parachuting.

killed in action whilst commanding the 21st Independent Company (Pathfinders) during Operation *Husky* (Sicily) in July 1943, when his aircraft was shot down.

A number of items were designed to allow greater mobility on the battlefield itself. These included the Welbike collapsible motorcycle that could be folded into a CLE. Another idea was the folding bicycle that could be attached to a man in the same way as the leg bag for parachuting. These, however, did not prove popular in the reality of the battlefield, as the cyclist became an easy target.

Lightweight motorcycles and jeeps were also designed and used, either being deployed by parachute or landed in a glider. The airborne trolley proved a useful piece of equipment. Its metal frame and canvas could be folded up into a CLE for deployment and then quickly assembled on the ground to be filled with supplies. The trolley could then be pushed or pulled by means of the toggle ropes each man carried. The trolley was large enough to carry an injured man if required.

CONDITIONS OF SERVICE

It is difficult to define everyday life for a paratrooper, as much depended upon where they were located, what they were doing at the time and what resources were available. Even whilst back home in 'Blighty', experiences varied.

At times they were accommodated in barracks, other times they were billeted out with local families who had spare rooms. In 1940, 11 SAS was based in Knutsford, partly for its close proximity to RAF Ringway. It lacked the normal military facilities of a peacetime camp and so civilian premises were taken over. The Royal George Inn on the High Street became the officers' mess, the headquarters was next to the fish and chip shop and parades were taken on Jail Square. At other times, men were accommodated in buildings designed for the purpose. One soldier recalls the collection of seven huts that accommodated his unit, one containing the showers and toilets with the other six providing the sleeping accommodation. The men each had a bed, a small cupboard by the side of it, four blankets and used their kit bag as a pillow. In the centre of the hut was a coke-burning Tortoise

D

THE DZ AT ARNHEM, SEPTEMBER 1944

One of the difficulties with airborne troops is how to give them portability and transport on the ground. During World War II, gliders were used to land jeeps, trailers and even small tanks such as the Tetrarch. However, there was always a limit to the number of aircraft available and therefore a limit as to what could be carried, so other means had to be found to facilitate movement around the battlefield that would take up a minimum of space and be capable of being air-dropped.

One item designed to give greater mobility was the airborne trolley. This could be folded up and placed into a CLE to be air-dropped, then easily assembled on the DZ within a few minutes following the drop, as is shown in this scene at the DZ at Ginkel Heath near Arnhem. On a flat surface the trolley could be pushed by one man; on more uneven terrain, the men's toggle ropes could be attached to the front to pull it along. The trolley was also large enough to carry a man, which was useful for evacuating the wounded.



GRAHAM TURNER



Private Ronald Gear at home, having been given leave shortly after passing his parachute training in May 1943. This was most likely his embarkation leave before he left for North Africa.

stove. Men had come from many different backgrounds and brought with them their different habits. For this soldier, the hut was considered luxury accommodation, and he found the wearing of pyjamas by the 'posh blokes' strange when he was used to only sleeping in a shirt or sometimes nothing at all. Accommodation was segregated, as with the rest of the Army, in terms of rank, with an officers' mess, sergeants' mess and other ranks' accommodation. For the officers and sergeants their individual messes offered a place to live and to socialize with their equals.

Daily life would normally consist of physical exercise and training in areas such as weaponry. Most Sundays, a church parade was held and religion was seen as important to a soldier's welfare. However, even in this area, Airborne Forces were leading the way. Upon formation of the 1st Airborne Division, Padre John Hodgins had been appointed as senior chaplain. During his interview, he had been asked what he felt about religious instruction and had replied that he had no right to instruct a man what to believe. Instead of religious instruction, he created a 'Padres Hour' during which men would discuss the big important questions. It was an idea later copied by the rest of the Army.

Despite their often demanding physical workload, men still took the opportunity to enjoy themselves. Sport was encouraged within The Parachute Regiment, as it not only kept men fit but helped develop them as a team. Most of

the battalions had inter-company competitions in sports such as rugby, football, boxing, athletics and hockey. The belief was that if the men were busy with sport, this would also help keep them out of the mischief that young, bored men sometimes get themselves into – but this did not always work. Private Ronald Gear reported home in a letter that he had been seeing a local girl; however, he doubted it would last long, as her father blamed his unit for stealing apples from his orchard.

Whilst stationed in the UK, men could gain a welcome leave pass to see their families. Many men had left their wives and children at home when they had answered the country's call for duty. Depending where they were sent, and if their children had been evacuated to the country, it could be a long time before they saw their loved ones again.

Men used the normal recreational facilities to be found in towns, such as pubs, cinemas and dance halls. The extra two shillings a day pay, and the appeal of the maroon beret, was seen as an advantage to attracting the local girls at the dances, especially when they were in tough competition against American servicemen. Some Paras felt the Americans had an unfair advantage with access to the American PX (Post Exchange; the American equivalent to the NAAFI) where goods that were unobtainable elsewhere could be bought. Occasionally, events would spiral out of control, resulting in fights between the Paras and other units. This could lead to places being put out of bounds to avoid tensions with the local community or other units serving in the area. One soldier reports, however, that, despite these bans, there was normally a

‘motley collection of vehicles’ to be found on the parade ground at the end of the weekend, these having been ‘borrowed’ from the nearby town to aid Paras on their way back to camp, including on one occasion a Wilts and Dorset double-decker bus.

Facilities were also provided on camp. One WAAF recalls sewing on newly qualified Paras’ wings for them in the bar at RAF Ringway at the end of their course in return for a drink. It was not uncommon for WAAFs to date and even marry Paras or their instructors; however, the women at RAF Ringway were reminded that most of the men were only there for two weeks and then may go and be killed. These were men in the prime of their life who did not know what tomorrow would bring, so it is hardly surprising that weddings were not uncommon within The Parachute Regiment. These were opportunities for the men to celebrate; families scraped together their rations and improvised to make the best possible day. One soldier recalls the men drinking from jam jars as beer glasses were in short supply, and a meal consisting of a slice of spam, a slice of chicken, topped by lettuce and margarine or Marmite, with some items acquired through the black market. His new wife had impressively managed to obtain a two-tier wedding cake by skimping on her rations in the lead-up to the big day.

Organisations such as the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and the Navy, Army, Air Force Institute (NAAFI) provided recreational facilities close to where men were based. The NAAFI had come into existence in 1921, created by the British Government to run recreational establishments and sell goods to servicemen and their families. The Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA) operated as part of the NAAFI from 1939, providing entertainments such as concert parties and theatre productions to service personnel both in the UK and across the world.

Although all men serving with the Paras had served with other units, their experiences had been varied. Some had already seen action as part of the British Expeditionary Force and witnessed first hand the withdrawal



The newly married Lieutenant-Colonel and Mrs Pearson leave the church after their wedding in 1944, with his men forming a guard of honour. They were married immediately following his return from Normandy. For his work in Normandy Lt. Col. Alastair Pearson would be awarded his fourth Distinguished Service Order.

LEFT

The 1st Parachute Brigade disembarks from a ship in Algiers in November 1942 as part of Operation *Torch*. This was the first time the Paras had deployed at brigade strength and for many of the men their first experience of being abroad.

RIGHT

Lieutenant H. Stanning of Sunningdale, Berkshire, boils water over a fire in Italy during 1943. Functions of everyday life such as eating, washing and sleeping continued wherever they were deployed, but were adapted to suit the terrain and role the men found themselves in.



from Dunkirk. For others, embarking for foreign destinations with The Parachute Regiment would be their first experience of going anywhere abroad, having seen little of their own country. The first major movement of men abroad for the Paras was for Operation *Torch*, with some men flying by Dakota via Gibraltar, whilst others sailed to North Africa on troopships such as the SS *Arundel Castle* from the River Clyde. Troop movement was dangerous, with enemy submarines preying on convoys. Men were expected to take part in evacuation drills, in case their ship was hit. Para reinforcements being sent to North Africa were made all too aware of this threat in December 1942 when their troopship the SS *Strathallan* was hit by torpedo and sunk. Amongst the dead were five nurses.

Lieutenant-Colonel Hill records that, on the trip to North Africa, time on ship was used to prepare and plan right down to section level, only to find that the plans had to be changed due to German troop movements. While overseas on operations, everyday life was very much about making the best of a situation. A temporary home could be a building, a dug-out or out in the open, depending on what was going on at the time.

Men often found themselves in an alien environment. One soldier of the 1st Parachute Battalion reported being in wonder at his first sight of the beauty of Algiers, only to later find another side to the city in the form of vermin, dirt and insects. Transport was also in short supply: the next leg of his journey was carried out on three ancient buses that broke down. One of the rear party, making his way back to join the Battalion was slightly luckier in that he travelled by train, albeit in cattle trucks. 'Airborne initiative' was soon in play, as they

Sergeant Huntly of the 2nd Parachute Brigade uses the mirror of a military vehicle whilst shaving in North Africa, December 1942. Hygiene in the field was essential in order to keep disease at bay.



made friends with the engine driver who gave them hot water for their tea whenever they stopped. This soldier was obviously good at making friends with the locals, as later he was given the task of liaising with the local mayors to obtain wood from bombed-out houses for the cooks to use for their fires.

Life at times could be challenging. Weather conditions could be very different to those the soldiers were used to at home, ranging from boiling hot in locations like New Delhi and Kabrit, to freezing conditions suffered on the Winter Line in Italy by the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade in 1943. Living rough came with its own problems, with one soldier reporting that the highlight of January 1943 was being deloused at a field hospital nearby. Rations could vary depending on where the men were located, ranging from bullied beef and biscuits in the field as part of their 24-hour ration pack to fresh rations such as stew when field kitchens could provide it. Tea blocks were provided that the men could put in hot water, when available; however, there were many unfavourable comments about the taste due to the chlorine tablets that were in the water for purification purposes.

Men still found time for entertainment while abroad. In one battalion at Christmas time, the Padre was delighted to find a shop open, as indicated by the large queue of men outside. Sadly, he found out once he joined the queue that the 'shop' stocked certain immoral ladies. When withdrawn from the



Privates Morgan, Williamson and Mathews of the 4th Parachute Battalion rest in a dug-out in Italy. The dug-out provided some shelter from the elements, while around them can be seen items such as jerry cans and mess tins.



Soldiers from the 4th Parachute Battalion take time out for sightseeing at the Parthenon in Athens, January 1945. The 4th Parachute Battalion left Greece shortly after this picture was taken, having undertaken an internal security role in the previous few months following the German withdrawal.

line, men took the opportunity to play sport much as they had done at home. In more peaceful areas they were able to see some of the sights and have photos taken to send home to friends and family. Letters could be sent and received from loved ones, although these did require censorship for security reasons. In North Africa, men could see horse and camel racing and even once set up a road race, a Tripoli version of the Monaco Grand Prix. Accounts of these more social times abroad often mentioned the welcome presence of nurses, a little reminder of home. Nursing staff were not just there to treat injuries sustained on the battlefield, for the men were still susceptible to normal illnesses.

BELIEF AND BELONGING

The Parachute Regiment did not have the hundreds of years of tradition or history to draw upon to form their identity as other contemporary units did. The Paras of the 1940s had to make their own history, and this is reflected in their motto that looks forward to their next action – *Utrinque Paratus* meaning ‘Ready for Anything’.

There were two major factors that led to Paras developing a particularly strong *esprit de corps*. Firstly, every man was a volunteer; they were there because they choose to be, not because the Army told them to be. Secondly, they had all passed the tough training that had tested them both physically and mentally. The training had not only tested them as individuals, but also their ability to function as a unit. It broke down boundaries, bringing together men from many different backgrounds into a cohesive force. By doing so it set them apart from other infantry units; they were fitter and more capable than their counterparts. They also tended to be younger, as older men were unable to keep up with the fitness requirements. For example, Lt. Col. John Frost, who commanded the 2nd Parachute Battalion and would lead his men through the Bruneval Raid, North Africa and on to Arnhem, was only 30 years old when he was given command of the battalion in 1942.

The character of the officers and men joining the unit played an important role in developing the bond within The Parachute Regiment. At formation, No. 2 Commando/11 SAS had established a maverick reputation for itself; and although the regiment settled somewhat as it became established, it still

attracted colourful characters. One such was Maj. Digby Tatham-Warter, who at one point during Arnhem led a bayonet charge with a pistol in one hand, an umbrella in the other and wearing a bowler hat. At another stage in the battle, Tatham-Warter took out a German armoured vehicle by simply poking the driver in the eye with his umbrella. The umbrella became famous amongst the men and Tatham-Warter instantly recognizable for it. For Tatham-Warter, who struggled to remember passwords, the umbrella had a practical purpose in that he believed that only an Englishman would carry one, and thus he would be recognized. The battle of Arnhem not only brought out the

Lieutenant-Colonel John Frost, CO 2nd Parachute Battalion, meets Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower in North Africa. Lieutenant-Colonel Frost had already seen action at Bruneval and would go on to lead his battalion at the battle of Arnhem in 1944.





Lieutenant John Timothy with a US paratrooper from 2nd Bn/503rd PIR in September 1942, while he was serving as a liaison officer with the Americans. Lieutenant Timothy would go on to be awarded three Military Crosses in an 18-month period.

quirky characters, but also those who became known for their bravery and leadership. For example, Maj. John Timothy was awarded the Military Cross for the third time for Arnhem, his fourth combat jump of the war. He had received his first MC in Tunisia in March 1943, having led a patrol into enemy territory and brought back valuable intelligence before leading a courageous defence when surrounded by enemy forces in the Beja sector. He received his second MC in October 1943 for his part in Operation *Simcol*, where he dropped behind enemy lines and spent a month on a search-and-rescue mission for Allied prisoners of war (POWs). In addition, he had been a liaison officer



A last-minute discussion with the crew of a Whitley before a training jump. The man on the left-hand side of the picture is believed to be Cpl. Frankie Garlick, who would become hung up underneath a Whitley and be forced to land on his back on the runway whilst still attached to the aircraft.

Corporal Hicks carves his new Parachute Regiment cap badge in Italy, 1943. His old Army Air Corps cap badge is still on his beret. Insignia helped to mark out the Paras and strengthen the bond of a specialised unit.



to an American airborne unit and is thought to be the first British officer to have received American parachute wings.

Bravery was expected not just on the battlefield. Some men's actions became legendary even during training, such as Cpl. Frankie Garlick who had the misfortune to become the first recorded 'hang up'. Garlick jumped from a Whitley bomber during a demonstration jump for VIPs at RAF Abbotsinch (now Glasgow International Airport), but his parachute snagged on exiting. As a consequence he found himself dangling from the fuselage. The aircrew were unable to release him or haul him back into the aircraft and so, after a number of circuits of the airfield, the decision was made that the pilot would land as carefully as possible. Garlick had the good fortune to land with his back to the runway and used the parachute as a sled, surviving with only minor cuts and bruises. He picked himself up and walked towards the NAAFI for a drink.

The attitude within the Airborne Forces was very much one of 'work hard, play hard' and some officers arranged exercises to take in both of these aspects. Perhaps the best example was the officer who managed to shoot grouse in Yorkshire and catch salmon in Scotland before going cub-hunting in Oxfordshire, all in one week whilst on exercise.

Those in command sought to assist in the creation of this strong sense of identity and of belonging through the introduction of clothing and insignia that marked the Paras out as something separate, something different to the rest of the British Army. The issue of the Denison smock and maroon beret gave the men a different appearance to other soldiers. Insignia was also chosen to mark men out as part of the Airborne Forces. The maroon badge depicting the winged horse Pegasus linked them to Greek mythology; the idea of Bellerophon riding Pegasus into battle, in doing so becoming the first Airborne warrior. While the Pegasus flash was worn by all Airborne Forces, the Parachute wings were special to those who had passed their Parachute

training, demonstrating their ability to conquer fear itself by jumping from an aircraft. It provided them with the hallmark that they were capable of doing something that not everyone could.

By the end of the war, the Paras' reputation had been established through their accomplishments and their achievements recognized at the highest levels. Many still quote Field Marshall Montgomery's words, first used as the foreword to the Hilary St. George Saunders' book *The Red Beret*, when he asks the question 'What manner of men are these who wear the maroon red beret?', and in particular the line, 'They are in fact, men apart, every man an emperor'. However, it is in reading the whole foreword that a true sense of the bond that exists amongst this group of men, in particular when Montgomery states that the most decisive factor in battle is the spirit of the warrior, a spirit that is found amongst the story of The Parachute Regiment.

EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE

Battle played a key role in the experience of the ordinary Para during World War II. During the course of this period they would earn 29 battle honours, fight over different terrain, under different conditions and against different enemies. With each campaign, their capability increased as lessons were learned that could be implemented on the next operation. The scale of the

The Bruneval raiders, including Maj. John Frost, return to England in February 1942. Bruneval gave the new Airborne Forces a much-needed success, thus silencing critics who felt they were a waste of resources.



actions that the Paras were involved in steadily increased with this experience, from raiding party operations to full-scale divisional attacks, culminating in the largest airborne battle of the war – the Rhine Crossing in March 1945.

The first operation for Airborne Forces came on 7 February 1941, when a group of men from 11 SAS and the Royal Engineers departed from the UK for Malta from where they would mount a raid to blow the Tragino Aqueduct in Italy. The Tragino Aqueduct was the main water supply for the province of Apulia and fed many factories, dockyards and other military targets. Disruption of the supply would, the British hoped, lead to a disruption of the Italian war effort in North Africa and Albania. It was decided that aerial bombardment was unlikely to produce the desired results, and so a decision was made to send a group of parachutists in to blow one of the main pillars of the aqueduct.

The news of the operation came at a time of low morale for 11 SAS; many men had requested transfers back to their old units as they were desperate to see action. Not surprisingly, when news came in of the operation, all 500 men of the battalion stepped forward, each with a reason why he would be essential to the task. From these men, a small group was picked and began training.

On the night of 10 February, eight Whitley bombers took off from Malta. The plan was that, having blown the aqueduct, the men would make their way over 50 miles of mountainous terrain to the mouth of the River Sele, where a British submarine would extract them. On the night, five of the Whitleys found the drop zone and dropped their loads; however, the two aircraft that were carrying weapons and explosives were unable to drop their loads due to the container release mechanism icing up. The last Whitley dropped its load of engineers late and in the wrong location. Despite the shortfall, the men continued on with the raid and by the early hours of 11 February the waterway had been breached. The men now followed the extraction plan with the intention of rendezvousing with the submarine HMS *Triumph*.

Over the course of the next few days, however, all of the men were captured. Had they made it to the coast they would not have found the submarine, as it had been ordered to leave due to enemy activity in the area. The aqueduct was repaired soon after with little adverse impact on the water supply. However, the raid did cause alarm within Italy, with the result that men were sent to guard key installations and more stringent air raid precautions put in place.

In September 1941, 11 SAS changed its name to the 1st Parachute Battalion and, with the creation of the 2nd and 3rd Parachute Battalions that same month, the 1st Parachute Brigade was formed.

The 1st Parachute Brigade would soon be called on to conduct another raid: Bruneval. On this occasion it would fall to a company of the 2nd Parachute Battalion to launch an operation against a German *Würzburg* radar station situated on the northern coast of France, and this would become the Paras' first battle honour.

Radar was a new technology and the British needed to gain intelligence on the German capability. It was decided that the best solution was to steal parts of the radar apparatus and bring them home to enable them to be examined. For this a team of parachutists would jump in near the radar station to accompany a radar engineer, Flt. Sgt. Charles Cox. Once there, they would retrieve the necessary parts before the Royal Navy picked them up on the coast.



On the night of 27 February the company boarded Whitley bombers and took off for France under the command of Maj. John Frost. On landing the Germans defending the radar station were killed or captured and the apparatus was removed. On arriving at the beach, however, it was found that it had not yet been secured. The party tasked with this had been dropped in the wrong valley and were making their way to the beach when they came across a German patrol. In the confusion of the darkness, one of the Germans joined the British patrol, but only until his demise when the British realized they had an extra man.

Having taken the beach, the Royal Navy was signalled, and shortly after 0230hrs the raiders were picked up along with the apparatus and a couple of prisoners. The Bruneval Raid was an important victory that gave the nation a morale boost at a difficult time in the war. For the paratroopers it demonstrated what they were capable of, at a time when there were critics who argued that they were a waste of resources. The modern C Coy, 2 PARA, is still called Bruneval Company in honour of the first battle honour.

On 1 August 1942, The Parachute Regiment was formed, along with the Glider Pilot Regiment as units of the Army Air Corps. This decision grouped the individual parachute battalions into one regiment, with the new organization becoming a part of the established army rather than a novelty. The regiment had proved that it could conduct raids at company level; it was now time to move on to larger-scale operations.

The 1st Parachute Brigade was sent to North Africa in November 1942 as part of Operation *Torch*, and it didn't take long before the battalions found

Two men of the 2nd Parachute Battalion armed with a Bren gun take cover behind rocks at Medjez el Bab in North Africa. Scrim and hessian were used to break up the shape of the helmet for camouflage purposes, and would later become a status symbol amongst Airborne Forces.

themselves in action. In planning, the Allies had identified the ports at Bizerta and Tunis as key targets; taking the ports would restrict enemy movements across the Mediterranean Sea. However, Tunis was more than 500 miles from the Allies' current base in Algiers. Around the halfway point was Bone Airfield, which consequently was identified as a key target.

On 12 November, the 3rd Parachute Battalion jumped from Douglas C-47 Skytrains of the 60th Troop Carrier Group USAAF, onto Bone Airfield and seized the much-needed airfield for the Allies, only just ahead of German *Fallschirmjäger* who had been tasked with the same objective. The drop had been a success with only one fatality – a man who accidentally shot himself with his Sten gun during the jump. The local population took much interest in their landing, in particular the parachutes from which, one local estimated, 554 sets of silk underwear could be made.

Four days later, the 1st Parachute Battalion dropped and secured a key crossroads at Beja, 90 miles from Tunis, allowing the link-up between the First and Eighth Armies to occur. The jump was successful, apart from one man killed and two injured as a result of 'roman candling'. On arrival at Beja, Lt. Col. Hill learned that the French in the town had been threatened with reprisals if they let the British take the town. Hill bluffed that his force was much larger than it actually was, and he proceeded to march the battalion through the streets twice – once in their helmets and a second time in their berets – in order that the French would believe there were two battalions of men. The French duly handed over control of the town, and the Germans soon received intelligence that a much larger unit of men had dropped than actually were delivered.

Following on from the drop into Beja, on 24 November 1942 Lt. Col. Hill led the 1st Parachute Battalion in battle at Soudia against an enemy of around 300 Italian troops. Hill, however, had reason to question the quality of these troops. Having approached three tanks, he fired through the visor of one, and the Italian crew immediately surrendered. On approaching the second tank, he banged on the side, and the crew surrendered. Sadly for Hill the third tank was manned by a German crew, who were not going to surrender quite so easily and opened fire, resulting in him being hit in the chest, arm and neck. Following his evacuation, Hill was operated on and went on to make a full recovery, later being awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his part in the battle. The 1st Parachute Battalion continued to see heavy fighting during this period and by the beginning of December, they were joined by the 3rd Parachute Battalion and found themselves fighting as an ordinary infantry unit.

Meanwhile the 2nd Parachute Battalion had fared less well. Having been tasked with destroying enemy aircraft at Pont du Fahs, Depienne and Oudna,

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THE 'RED DEVILS', NORTH AFRICA, 1943

A 3in. mortar team from the 1st Parachute Brigade, hard at work during the battle of Kef El Debna at some point between 27 and 29 March 1943. It was hard fighting like this that earned The Parachute Regiment their reputation as fearsome fighters during the Tunisian Campaign. British intelligence soon picked up German radio traffic announcing the arrival of '*Die Rote Teufeln*', the 'Red Devils'. This nickname derived from the tail hanging from the Paras' Denison smock and the red Tunisian soil that clung to their uniforms.

The month of March 1943 was a vicious period that would see three battle honours awarded to the newly formed Parachute Regiment for the battles at Tamera, Djebel Dahra and Kef El Debna. These battles should not be seen as three distinct events, with breaks between them, but rather a continuous period of fighting. The regimental war diaries show that the 1st Parachute Brigade received no let up during this period and spent the majority of the month fighting.



GRAHAM TURNER '10



The 1st Parachute Battalion marches through a hilly landscape in North Africa, 1942. Around this period, the battalion was marched through a town twice, once wearing helmets, the second time wearing berets, to give the illusion that they were a bigger force than was actually the case.

they learned shortly before take-off on 29 November that the first two airfields had been abandoned. It was therefore decided to concentrate their efforts on Oudna. Following the drop they were faced with a gruelling task in freezing conditions carrying heavy loads. By 1430hrs on 30 November they were in position. A Company under the command of Maj. Dick Ashford moved down into the valley, whilst C Coy and Battalion HQ moved to higher ground on the left. It was then that they found themselves under attack, and it soon became clear that their position was untenable. With no aircraft on the ground to destroy, Lt. Col. Frost made plans to move westwards to link up with the First Army. However, the First Army had been halted by heavy opposition, leaving the 2nd Parachute Battalion isolated 50 miles behind enemy lines. What followed was an epic withdrawal, with 16 officers and 250 men lost from the battalion's strength by the time they reached Allied lines. Oudna became one of The Parachute Regiment's battle honours.

By the end of December 1942, the main attack on Tunis had been postponed as none of the Allies were in a position to mount it. Brigadier Edwin Flavell, who commanded the 1st Parachute Brigade, argued that his Paras should be withdrawn in order to re-form and train for further airborne operations. However, shortages necessitated that they stay and fight as normal infantrymen. By early January 1943, the majority of the 1st Parachute Brigade was at Algiers; but the 3rd Parachute Battalion were involved in intense fighting at Djebel Azzag, or what would later become known as Green Hill. Whilst the rest of the battalion took over the 5th Battalion Royal

East Kent Regiment's ('the Buffs') defensive positions, A and B Coys were tasked with attacking the heavily fortified hillside alongside the Buffs. This position was held by Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 'Barenthin' and Oberst Witzig's parachute engineers. Although the Buffs' attack was unsuccessful, A Coy managed to secure the western flank of the position. The following night B Coy pushed through to take the second crest; the Germans counter-attacked but were seen off by a bayonet charge. B Company was then counter-attacked again, this time by a larger group of 180 *Fallschirmjäger*. Running low on ammunition, the decision was made by Maj. David Dobie, OC B Coy, to withdraw down the hill. The following day they were relieved and rejoined the rest of the 1st Parachute Brigade at Algiers.

At the beginning of February 1943, the 1st Parachute Battalion fought the battle of Djebel Alliliga supported by the French Foreign Legion and 3rd Battalion the Grenadier Guards. Having fought off intense counter-attacks, sustained heavy casualties and run low on ammunition, the 1st Parachute Battalion was forced to withdraw under cover of the 3rd Parachute Battalion. By the end of the battle they had lost nearly half their strength. There was no respite for either battalion and they were soon to earn another battle honour at El Hadjeba on 26 February 1943. The 1st Parachute Brigade was manning the front at an area known as 'Happy Valley' when enemy forces at divisional strength attacked. During the battle, the 3rd Parachute Battalion fired over 3,000 mortar rounds, raked the enemy with machine-gun fire and engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Among the gallant acts was that by Lt. Street, who found himself captured by the Germans following a patrol. Street was ordered by his captors to take them between the positions so they could attack the headquarters. Instead, Street led them to the nearest company strongpoint where they came under heavy fire; he then proceeded to knock out the German officer and make his way back to friendly lines, before leading his men in a charge against the enemy platoon. Lieutenant Street was later awarded the Military Cross for his actions. Four hundred enemy were killed and a further 200 captured during the battle. The 3rd Parachute Battalion had suffered 14 killed. The 1st Parachute Battalion meanwhile channelled the remaining enemy into barbed-wire entanglements covered by machine-gun fire.

March 1943 saw no let up for the men of The Parachute Regiment. During that month they found themselves involved in almost constant fighting, earning three battle honours at Tamera, Djebel Dahra and Kef El Debna having fought against elite troops under the command of Oberst Witzig. Fighting during this period was fierce; at one stage even Brig. Eric Down, CO 1st Parachute Brigade, found himself with a rifle in hand and taking part in a charge of men from 1st Parachute Battalion HQ.

By the end of this period of fighting, the battalions were depleted of men, their uniforms threadbare and their weapons no longer serviceable from the heavy use they had received. On the night of 14 April, the US 9th Infantry Division moved up to relieve them. Over the course of those few months the Paras had forged their reputation in battle, proving not only their physical stamina but their mental drive to make the impossible possible. When the spirit and determination of the British Para is discussed, it is often later campaigns that are cited as evidence. However, it is the North African campaign that formed the character and ethos of The Parachute Regiment that the men uphold to this day.

Whilst the North African campaign was ongoing, new units continued to be added to the Airborne Forces and the decision was made in November



1941 to form the 1st Airborne Division. At first the division only had the 1st Parachute Brigade, but it was slowly brought up to strength with the creation of the 2nd Parachute Brigade in July 1942, containing the newly formed 4th, 5th and 6th Parachute Battalions. Later, in November of that year, the 3rd Parachute Brigade was formed containing the 7th, 8th and 9th Parachute Battalions, bringing the 1st Airborne Division up to its full complement of three brigades. Having proven themselves in battle, the 1st Parachute Brigade was joined in North Africa by the rest of the 1st Airborne Division for the next phase of the Mediterranean campaign.

A soldier works on a Sicily briefing model with the aid of aerial photography. Briefing models were made during planning to provide the soldiers going into battle with as much detail as possible. Examples for Bruneval, Normandy and the Rhine Crossing can be found in the Airborne Assault Museum.

The next objective was the capture of Sicily, and for this the Airborne Forces would form an essential part of the plan, becoming the spearhead of the amphibious force. The 1st Airborne Division had been given the task of securing the Ponte Grande Bridge and the Primosole Bridge. The first task went to the 1st Airlanding Brigade, who used glider-borne infantry to attack on 9 July 1943. The second bridge, Primosole, was given to the 1st Parachute Brigade, who attacked four days later on 13 July. Securing the Primosole Bridge was essential to taking Sicily, as it would allow the seaborne troops to advance north. However, the aircraft and gliders carrying the brigade group to the target area were hit by both friendly and enemy fire. The Allied naval gun crews had previously come under attack, and a haze over the sea on the night of the 13th made target recognition difficult. To make matters worse, the crews of the aircraft were inexperienced in combat and became disorientated, which resulted in only a quarter of the troops landing accurately. The bridge was taken, but the Paras soon found themselves under counter-attack from three sides by 4. Fallschirmjäger-Brigade and other forces. Over the course of the next three days, the battle raged and the balance swung like a pendulum, until the Eighth Army vanguard arrived with much-needed reinforcements to secure the bridge.

Having taken Sicily, the next step for the Allies was Italy. For this, the 4th Parachute Brigade was attached to the 1st Airborne Division. The 4th Parachute Brigade had been formed in the Middle East in December 1942 and was initially assigned to the 4th Airborne Division, a phantom division designed to confuse the enemy in the lead-up up to the Mediterranean campaign by marching on paper and sending radio communications. However, as the need grew for a real brigade, the newly formed 156th, 10th and 11th Parachute Battalions were assigned to it.

On 9 September, the 1st Airborne Division landed unopposed at Taranto. This would become the first battle honour for the 4th, 5th, 6th 10th and 156th Parachute Battalions. It was during this landing that the 6th Parachute Battalion lost 130 officers and men, including the CO, when the minelayer

HMS *Abdiel* hit a mine in Taranto Harbour and sank. The 2nd Parachute Brigade held the port whilst the 4th Parachute Brigade continued the advance and was joined by the rest of the division, eventually reaching Foggia where they were relieved. By November 1943 plans were being made for the next stage of the war, and the 1st Airborne Division would be needed. The division therefore returned to the UK, leaving behind what then became known as the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade in Italy.

Back in the UK, the Airborne Forces had experienced a growth spurt. On 23 April 1943, the War Office had given permission for the setting up of a second division, which became known as the 6th Airborne Division. There were only two divisions, the 1st and the 6th, the numbers being chosen to confuse the enemy. The task of setting up the new 6th Airborne Division was given to Maj. Gen. Richard 'Windy' Gale, who set about the task with great haste. By 23 December 1943, the new 6th Airborne Division was ordered to be ready for operations by the beginning of February 1944.

It was time for the new 6th Airborne Division to cut its teeth, and this time it would be closer to home – Normandy. Planners had studied the African and Sicily campaigns and knew that any amphibious landing on the northern coast of France would require the use of airborne troops to incapacitate the German defences until enough men had landed to secure the beaches. A number of options were looked at as to how the men could best be used, and the decision was eventually made that they would hold the left

Three Paras from the 5th Parachute Battalion load a 3in mortar in Italy, 1943. The 3in. mortar was a standard weapon within the British Army during this period, providing much-needed support, and could be parachuted in using the Container Light Equipment (CLE).



Captain Francis Vere Hodge MC observing naval shelling in June 1944. Having received a Military Cross for his part in Sicily, he would go on to receive a Mention in Despatches for his actions in Normandy with the 7th Parachute Battalion. After the war he became a vicar.



flank of the British area of operations. Training increased until every man could do his job perfectly by day or night, and all were ready for 5 June 1944 – D-Day. However, weather conditions that day were appalling and so D-Day was postponed until the following day. On the night of 5 June, the first aircraft tasked with carrying the 7,000 men of the 6th Airborne Division took to the skies, leading the Allied invasion of Northwest Europe.

For the paratroopers dropping into Normandy that night, there was no certainty that they would land in the right place; nor was there any guarantee that they would have the right equipment or be able to find their units. Each man had been trained to deal with these situations, but alone in the dark of the Normandy countryside it was their individual decisions that made the difference between life and death; each man faced his own battle. Major Browne was one such man who later wrote to his mother that he landed ‘20 miles behind the lines, in wrong place’. The only other man from his stick that he found was his batman, and he had landed in the river. The two men ran into trouble soon after when a German patrol on bicycles spotted them; Browne and his batman opened fire, killing three members of the patrol. As they made their way through the Normandy countryside, the two men came across others in the same predicament, and slowly their patrol grew to 35 men.

The Paras were not the only infantry units in the Airborne Forces at the time. Glider-borne infantry units, such as 2nd Battalion the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry, had been trained to come into battle by gliders which had the advantage of a quiet entry with the body of men together, ready for the attack. Having taken their target of Pegasus Bridge, the Ox and Bucks were reinforced by the 7th Parachute Battalion who had dropped nearby and repulsed a number of counter-attacks by the enemy during the night and day that followed.

Meanwhile the 9th Parachute Battalion were involved in heavy fighting at the Merville Battery. The German battery at Merville was a series of well-

fortified casemates able to bring defensive fire down onto the Normandy beaches, so it was therefore imperative that they were taken out of action. An elaborate plan had been formulated and trained for, involving insertion by both glider and parachute. Six hundred men of the 9th Parachute Battalion dropped; however, weather conditions and heavy anti-aircraft fire saw them scattered across the marshes. By 0250hrs only 150 men had made it to the rendezvous point, but Lt. Col. Terence Otway, the CO, made the decision to go ahead with the attack and stormed the battery despite heavy resistance; placed explosives on the guns and withdrew to the next objective. Nearly half the men that made it to the Merville Battery were either killed or wounded in the battle.

June, July and August 1944 would see heavy fighting for the members of the 6th Airborne Division. Following the battle honours awarded for D-Day, the 6th Airborne Division would be awarded three more at Bréville, Dives Crossing and La Touques Crossing before returning to the UK in September 1944, to rest and prepare for the next operation.

For the 1st Airborne Division the next operation was already upon them. Since returning from Italy, the men had found themselves waiting. It had been difficult to watch as the less-experienced 6th Airborne Division had gone to Normandy, added to which was the frustration that grew as each new operation given to them was cancelled. For each operation they had planned, trained and prepared themselves mentally, and some were cancelled at the last minute. By 6 September they were given details of Operation *Comet*, an operation to attack Arnhem Bridge in the Netherlands on 10 September. This was the sixteenth operation given to the 1st Airborne Division, but it too would be cancelled. By 10 September, the men began to hear details of a plan very similar to Operation *Comet*, but which would be known as Operation *Market-Garden*, scheduled to begin on 17 September. The plan was to create an airborne carpet, with the Americans securing the bridges at Eindhoven and Nijmegen, whilst the British took the furthest bridges around Arnhem. By doing so, the Allies could advance and break into the Ruhr, potentially bringing the war to an early end.

However, Arnhem did not go to plan. The shortage of aircraft forced planners to carry out three lifts on separate days, thus not only leaving the



Men from the 1st Parachute Battalion having a final brew up before leaving for Arnhem at 1130hrs on 17 September 1944. Ten days later they reported that their numbers stood at 100 men; the rest had either been killed in action, taken prisoner or were now on the run in enemy territory.

Men of 3 Platoon, R Company, 1st Parachute Battalion armed with a Bren gun and Lee Enfield No. 4 rifles defend a shell hole during the battle of Arnhem.



men on the ground exposed but taking the element of surprise from the second and third lifts. In addition, intelligence had led the planners to believe that the enemy units in the area would be able to offer little in the way of resistance. On arrival, however, the paratroopers discovered that elements of II SS-Panzer Korps were refitting in the area, and as a consequence resistance was much heavier.

Despite this, members of the 2nd Parachute Battalion under the command of Lt. Col. Frost, a veteran of Bruneval, North Africa and Sicily, along with

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THE RHINE CROSSING, MARCH 1945

On 24 March 1945, the 6th Airborne Division took part in Operation *Varsity*, the final mass parachute and glider drop of World War II. Amongst those taking part was Cpl Aaron Walton of the 13th Parachute Battalion with his Paradox Bing. A number of dogs had been given to the British Army when owners found themselves unable to feed them due to wartime rationing. Some of these dogs were selected to become Paradoxes, which involved them being trained to jump under their own specially designed parachute. The Rhine Crossing would not be Bing's first jump into action. He was already a veteran of the Normandy campaign, where he had been caught in a tree during the jump and injured from shrapnel. During that campaign another dog and his handler, Glen and Pte. Emile Corteil, had been killed in action; they are buried together in the CWGC cemetery at Ranville.

On the ground, man and dog worked together to alert patrols to any danger they sensed while clearing areas. Following the battle, Cpl. Walton and Bing, along with the rest of the 6th Airborne Division, made their way through Germany to meet up with the Russians at the Baltic port of Wismar, where they were located at the end of the war in Europe.





A paratrooper sits in a Douglas Dakota en route for the Rhine Crossing on 24 March 1945. The Rhine Crossing remains to this day the largest ever British airborne battle. In the straps of his parachute harness sits his Mk. V Sten gun with its rear stock removed, ready to fight on landing.

elements of the Royal Engineers Squadron and Recce Company made their way to Arnhem Bridge. Having secured the buildings surrounding the northern end of the bridge, they took out a pillbox with the use of a 6-pdr anti-tank gun and flamethrowers. It was at this point that Lt. John 'Jack' Grayburn led his platoon in an attempt to take the southern side of the bridge, but the platoon came under heavy opposition and was ordered to withdraw. Frost attempted to outflank the positions south of the river; however, no boats could be found and the pontoon bridge was destroyed. Bitter fighting ensued at the bridge with the Paras holding out against armour and mortar fire.

The 1st Airborne Division had been tasked with holding Arnhem Bridge for 48 hours, after which they would be relieved by ground forces. The relief never came, but the men held the bridge for three days and four nights whilst under constant attack from artillery and infantry and with much fewer men than the planners had ever thought possible.

The battle turned in the Germans' favour. The 1st Airborne Division gradually withdrew to an area around Oosterbeek, which some Germans nicknamed 'the witches cauldron' because smoke rose from it and it constantly bubbled with small-arms fire. Having held out for a remarkable nine days, the 1st Airborne Division were ordered to withdraw across the river on the night of 25/26 September. Of the 10,095 men that went to

Arnhem, less than 3,000 returned across the river; the rest had either been killed or taken prisoner of war. Two Victoria Crosses were awarded posthumously to men of The Parachute Regiment: one to Lt. Grayburn of the 2nd Parachute Battalion and the other to Capt. Lionel Queripel of the 10th Parachute Battalion, both of whom had been killed in action whilst displaying the highest standard of leadership and courage.

Meanwhile the 6th Airborne Division, who had returned from Normandy and were training in the UK, found themselves being suddenly moved to the Ardennes at the end of December 1944 as the Germans attempted to break through the Allied lines. On 3 January 1945, the 13th Parachute Battalion began the attack on the village of Bure where heavy fighting raged for three days in bitter winter conditions. The Germans were beaten back and the 6th Airborne Division returned to the United Kingdom.

Their next operation would see them making the jump across the Rhine into Germany itself. On 25 March 1945, the 6th Airborne Division took part in the largest ever airborne drop of British Forces, with some 540 aircraft towing 1,300 gliders. Despite heavy casualties, within five-and-a-half hours the objectives had been taken. At first, German prisoners came in their hundreds; soon thousands of prisoners were being taken. Having linked up with Allied ground forces, the 6th Airborne Division took the lead on the 300-mile advance through Germany, linking up with the Russians at the Baltic port of Wismar.

For the Paras, the Rhine Crossing was the last major battle of World War II. A number were sent to the Far East, but by the time they arrived the atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, as the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade found in Greece, the old order had been



Men of the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade inside a Douglas Dakota en route to Greece. On their right arms they wear the Union Flag, indicating that they are British forces. These flag insignia are thought to have first been used during Operation *Dragoon* in Southern France, when the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade worked closely with American forces.

swept away by the war and troops were needed to help bring order to the new world that was taking its place. The 6th Airborne Division not only found themselves carrying out these duties in the Far East, but by the end of 1945, many had been sent to Palestine to deal with growing tensions between the Jewish and Arabic communities.

The 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade's story is an often forgotten part of The Parachute Regiment's history. After the 1st Airborne Division left them behind in Italy in 1943, they went on to fight for four bitter winter months in the mountains around Orsogna under the command of the 2nd New Zealand Division, taking part in the assault on the River Sangro. In August 1944 they were still in Italy, from where they boarded aircraft to take them on to participate in Operation *Dragoon*, the Allied invasion of Southern France, where they fought alongside American forces.

They were then returned to Italy to make ready for an airborne operation to be known as Operation *Manna*. There was concern that, following the German withdrawal, Greece would find itself in a power vacuum with a number of Greek guerrilla groups vying for power and destabilising the whole region. It was therefore deemed imperative that a force be dispatched that could deal with the guerrilla threat as well as ensuring the distribution of food to the civilians. On 12 October 1944, Operation *Manna* began with members of the 4th Parachute Battalion landing to secure the drop zone at Megara Airfield near Athens. A number of casualties were sustained on the drop zone due to the high winds on the day.

The brigade was greeted by cheering crowds on entering Athens; however, this goodwill was not to last. The brigade took over the policing of Athens and the guarding of key points, all in the face of marching and protests by rival Greek factions. On 17 October the 4th Parachute Battalion was dispatched to Thebes to pursue the withdrawing German forces, while the 5th Parachute Battalion left the city shortly after to go to Salonika where civil unrest ensued.

It soon became clear that the Paras were too few in number to be effective in Thebes and Salonika, so they were withdrawn back to Athens as unrest grew. During this time, the 4th Parachute Battalion held the area of the gasworks, while the 5th Parachute Battalion found themselves establishing

G

INTERNAL SECURITY OPERATIONS, GREECE, 1944

Upon return of the 1st Airborne Division to the UK in November 1943, the 2nd Parachute Brigade was left behind in Italy and became an Independent Brigade. Having seen action during Operation *Dragoon*, the Allied invasion of Southern France in August 1944, they were then recalled to Italy to jump into Greece as part of Operation *Manna*. Having landed in October 1944 with the objective of harassing enemy forces, they soon found themselves in the midst of a civil war that was breaking out amongst rival Greek factions – a far different scenario to that faced by their colleagues in the 1st and 6th Airborne Divisions fighting in Northwest Europe. As fighting on the streets intensified, the 5th Parachute Battalion suffered over 100 casualties and the 6th Parachute Battalion lost all its company commanders in fighting that was misunderstood by the press and public back home.

Men from the 4th Parachute Battalion were amongst those who had the difficult job of patrolling through the streets of Athens in late December and early January 1944, trying to maintain order and provide assistance to the civilian population whenever possible. Unusually, some men within the 4th Parachute Battalion blackened their webbing instead of using the normal Blanco colour. One theory is that this is the origin of the black DZ flash the men wear today on their uniform.





A British sniper in position on the Parthenon, Athens, December 1944, as smoke rises from a prison near Omonias Square in the city. In Greece, the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade was faced with a very different type of war compared to that encountered by Paras in Normandy and at Arnhem. Different skills and tactics were developed for counter-insurgency operations.

their position in the ruins of the Acropolis. Meanwhile the 6th Parachute Battalion had fought their way through to Omonias Square. On 26 December 1944, the 5th Parachute Battalion, supported by tanks of the 23rd Armoured Brigade attacked the main ELAS (Greek People's Liberation Army) stronghold, reaching Piraeus Road, thereby linking the 6th and 4th Parachute Battalions. The 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade then moved forward on 4 January 1945, using the Piraeus Road as their axis, and following more days of heavy fighting the ELAS forces finally withdrew. By the end of the fighting casualties were high: within the 6th Parachute Battalion all the company commanders had been killed or injured. With such a high price having been paid, and having fought an enemy that did not respect the normal rules of warfare, it hit the men particularly hard when they learned of reports back in the UK that they had been attacking innocent workers in a class war. Such was the concern that the Trades Union Congress sent out a delegation to investigate and, having been given the freedom to do so, reported of the great work carried out by the 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade. The brigade remained in Greece until the end of January 1945, when two divisions were sent to Greece to reinforce the brigade and subdue the unrest.

AFTER THE BATTLE

What happened to the individual soldier in the aftermath of battle could vary considerably depending on what had happened to him and to his unit during the engagement. Some would go on to fight the next battle, others would require treatment for injuries sustained, some may have been captured and for some, sadly, their fate was to be killed in action. In the longer term, there was the end of the war, which saw many men being demobbed whilst others found a career within the British Army.

For those who were fit to fight again, the period after a battle was a time to reorganize and prepare for the next encounter. Sometimes it could only be a matter of hours before the next battle, at other times there were months of preparation. Reports on lessons learned were crucial during this period, analysing as they did all aspects of a mission, from items of equipment through to the performance of command and control. All details were incorporated to ensure improvement for the next mission.

With the setting up of The Parachute Regiment had come the development of the supporting arms that were required for the regiment to function in battle. In the early stages it had become apparent that medical personnel would need to be able to parachute in order to provide medical treatment for the injured men on the ground. Traditionally, casualties were evacuated to the rear through a series of staging points where their injuries could be assessed and treated accordingly. This method, however, was



A casualty is attended to on the drop zone at Megara Airfield in Greece, 1944. The drop zone had been chosen from the air, due to the quick planning required for the operation. Unfortunately, high winds on the drop zone led to a number of casualties on landing.

unsuitable for airborne operations as the nature of jumping into a hostile environment, potentially surrounded, did not always make it possible to evacuate casualties.

To deal with this situation, the field ambulance section was placed in the evacuation chain to hold casualties until evacuation became possible, with additional surgical and nursing support given to these units. By April 1942, the new 16th Parachute Field Ambulance RAMC was formed at Hardwick Hall, under the command of Lt. Col. Malcolm MacEwan, known as 'Technicolor' for his collection of medals. Aged 47, MacEwan was old by parachuting standards; however, he was already an experienced veteran of World War I and set a great example to his men. Having been tested in battle, 16th Parachute Field Ambulance RAMC would provide the template for all medical units attached to the Airborne Forces. The changing nature of airborne battles often left these medical units exposed and led to a higher proportion of airborne medical personnel being taken prisoner of war than medical units in other arms.

Becoming a POW was the fate that befell a number of paratroopers; however, it did not always spell the end of their war. For the likes of Lt. Anthony Deane-Drummond, one of the officers on the Tragino Aqueduct raid with 11 SAS, it was just the beginning. Having been taken prisoner following the raid, he managed to escape from his prison camp. Dressed in workmen's overalls, he found a ladder, walked up to the fence and pretended to change a light bulb, before hopping over the fence. He was later apprehended but again escaped and made his way to Switzerland and eventually home to receive a Military Cross. Later in the war, whilst serving with the 1st Airborne Divisional Signals, Deane-Drummond went to Arnhem, once again escaping his fate as a POW and being awarded a Bar to his Military Cross in the process.

Deane-Drummond was not alone in making his escape from captivity following Arnhem. Sergeant Tex Banwell of the 10th Parachute Battalion was able to escape by making a hole in the cattle car being used to transport the POWs from Arnhem. The Dutch resistance was able to assist troops to get back to Allied lines and supported Operations *Pegasus 1* and *Pegasus 2* to return troops across the Rhine at great risk to themselves.

H

DRESSING STATION, ARNHEM, 1944

The normal procedure for dealing with casualties was to evacuate them through a chain of positions, each of which provided a higher level of care as the casualty was evacuated further back. The nature of airborne operations, however, often prevented the immediate evacuation of casualties. An extreme example of this was seen during Operation *Market-Garden* when the 1st Airborne Division found themselves fighting an intense battle with their backs against a river and hemmed in to the Oosterbeek perimeter. Hospitals that had been converted to provide medical treatment that should have been administered in safer positions, found themselves on the front line of the battle.

Medics, doctors and dentists (having been trained in anaesthetics) provided the best medical treatment they could under the conditions, with chaplains such as Father Benson shown here providing support in dealing with the huge number of casualties. It was whilst at an aid post, tending men who had been injured during a mortar attack, that Father Benson was hit by a mortar fragment. Captain Simmons of the RAMC amputated the chaplain's right arm, and he was given a large blood transfusion, before being evacuated to St Elisabeth's Hospital. Father Benson lost his fight for life on 27 September 1944 and was buried first in the grounds of the hospital, before later being reinterred at the CWGC cemetery in Oosterbeek.





A Para receives treatment at a dressing station during the Rhine Crossing, March 1945. Dressing stations used temporary accommodation wherever they could find it; in this case a house has been taken over.

However, for the majority of those captured the reality was the POW camp. The risk of being taken prisoner during airborne operations was understood; some Jewish soldiers even had their name officially changed so they could not be identified as Jews in the event of their capture by the Germans.

Although conditions in the POW camps varied, they tended to be poor. British troops were more fortunate than their Russian allies as the UK and Germany had both signed the Geneva Convention before the war, and this laid out what provisions would be made for POWs. Under the Geneva Convention, British officers were not required to work and compensation was supposed to be given to other ranks who did. Food and accommodation was supposed to be similar to that given to their own soldiers; however, the reality was often quite different. Germany was suffering from shortages and the POW population was not the priority. This led to many POWs becoming malnourished and lodged in poor-quality accommodation – a natural breeding ground for disease, particularly for those already weak from injuries sustained on the battlefield.

Even in these conditions, the character of the Para stood out. Regimental Sergeant Major John Lord was one such character. A former Guardsman, he became the first RSM of the 3rd Parachute Battalion and was capable of putting the fear of God into British and Germans alike. Having been taken prisoner at Arnhem, RSM Lord was sent to Stalag 11B near Fallingbomel in

Germany, just one of the camps that housed Paras during the war. In time, Stalag 11B would see around 2,000 airborne troops pass through its gates, according to RSM Lord's records, with an estimated 85 per cent of these wounded. On arrival at Stalag 11B, RSM Lord found the camp in a terrible condition and set about changing it by ensuring that the men kept it as best they could in the circumstances – and that included ordering the Germans about. RSM Lord would later be awarded an MBE in part for maintaining the morale of POWs in the camp.

Life in camp was still harsh: bed bugs and lice were common, and rations often consisted of no more than a bowl of watery vegetable soup and maybe a couple of potatoes. One of the highlights for POWs was the occasional distribution of Red Cross parcels, which often contained perceived luxury goods such as tea, tobacco and soap. It was also possible to send and receive a small amount of correspondence to and from home. Prisoners of war were given small postcards which could be sent home to try to reassure worried family. The Red Cross not only sent individual parcels, but items such as medical supplies, reading material and items for recreation when possible. However, these supplies were in short supply, with one medic reporting that many of his patients died through lack of proper facilities or nourishing food. Among them was Pte. Ronald Gear, who, having recovered in Stalag 11B from wounds received at Arnhem, caught meningitis and died a week before the camp was liberated. The cart that delivered Red Cross parcels around camp had another use: to carry the coffins bearing the dead. Each burial party was smartly overseen by RSM Lord, who insisted that the dead were treated with the dignity they deserved.

When the day came for Stalag 11B to be liberated in April 1945, an officer of the Coldstream Guards was sent to complete the task. On duty at the front gate he found an Airborne Forces soldier smartly turned out. Working on the misapprehension that the 6th Airborne Division had beaten him to the task, he asked the guard commander when they had arrived. 'Shortly after Arnhem, sir' came the reply. The officer's surprise grew when he was introduced to the smartly turned out RSM Lord and shown around the camp. The officer was impressed that, despite poor conditions, overcrowding and undernourishment, the camp was well ordered and run with military efficiency. RSM Lord insisted on staying until the last man was sent home. He remained in military service and went on to become the senior RSM in the British Army at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, spending over 20 years in the rank of RSM.

By the time most Paras that were POWs were being released the war in Europe was drawing to a close; but the war still continued in the Far East and members of the 5th Parachute Brigade, now freed from duties in Germany, were dispatched to the Far East and had travelled as far as India by August 1945 when the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought an end to the war there as well, with the Japanese surrender taking place in September 1945. The Paras were still required to assist in stabilizing the region as the existing administrative structures governing the area had broken down. Following internal security operations in places such as Singapore, and Semerang on the north coast of Java, the 5th Parachute Brigade returned to the UK in May 1946 and disbanded.

In addition to the Far East, British Paras found themselves dispatched to Palestine as the 6th Airborne Division was designated the Imperial Strategic Reserve based there. Almost immediately, they found themselves in the centre



Smiling members of X Troop, 11 SAS, as prisoners of war following their capture at Tragino in 1941. Photos were taken occasionally by the Red Cross to send home to families.

of the so-called 'Palestinian Question', dealing with inter-communal strife between Jewish and Arab populations. They would remain in Palestine until 1948 when they returned to the UK and were disbanded. In the same year, the decision had been made that one regular parachute brigade would be required in the post-war British Army. This was designated 16th Parachute Brigade, thereby establishing a link to its heritage by keeping the numbers of the 1st and 6th Airborne Divisions.

As with the rest of the British Army, the end of the war in 1945 saw the Parachute Regiment gradually reduced in numbers and its battalions merged and reordered as the Army returned to peacetime operations. Men were demobilized according to their age and service number; those with the lowest service numbers and therefore the longest service were prioritized for release. One soldier within The Parachute Regiment is recorded as having admitted to being AWOL so that he could be demobbed. Shortly after being evacuated from Dunkirk as part of the British Expeditionary Force, he had gone AWOL. However, still wishing to serve, he rejoined under a different name a month or so later. Under this name he went on to join The Parachute Regiment and serve with an outstanding record, receiving a Mention in Despatches and a Military Medal during his service in North Africa, Sicily and at Arnhem before going on to the Far East. By 1946, he was ready to go home and on learning that men with numbers around his original service number were now eligible to be demobbed, he finally admitted to his officer his true name. Due to his outstanding service, no charge was brought and he was demobbed shortly thereafter.

While men such as RSM Lord had found their chosen career and remained in the Army, the majority of Paras returned to the civilian world following

their demobilization. Many found the life that they returned to very different to the one they had left when they signed up. Adjustments had to be made on both sides, with families having to adapt to the return of the 'head of the family' and the men having to adjust to normal life following their extraordinary experiences during the war; and the support network of fellow Paras dealt with these changes in different ways. Some men returned to their everyday civilian lives with barely a mention of their wartime exploits. This is exemplified by unassuming men such as Maj. John Timothy, who had won three Military Crosses in 18 months and yet returned to his previous job as a Marks and Spencer's store manager immediately after the end of the war. Other men broke from their pre-war occupations and used the opportunity to make fresh starts.

The bond between these men, however, still existed and some found avenues to keep the links and friendships they had built during this time. In April 1946 the first *Pegasus Journal* was produced to keep people up to date with news from The Parachute Regiment and Airborne Forces community. The end of the war also saw the formation of an Old Comrades Association which in time would become The Parachute Regiment Association, with branches nationwide, providing an opportunity to bring the wider airborne community together to share their experiences, support each other and commemorate those that had passed. Commemorations of battles from this period still take place at places such as Normandy and Arnhem, with new generations of Paras being told of the exploits of their founding fathers.

Men of the 13th Parachute Battalion at Halfway House in the Far East, 1945. On top of the pillbox sits a Para with his Bren gun. Following the end of the war, Paras were used to stabilize areas where the old order had broken down.



For some Paras of this era, there was no after the battle. They rest close to where they died, from the neat lines of the large Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries to plots in small villages whose residents they had come to liberate.

COLLECTING, MUSEUMS AND RE-ENACTING

The history of The Parachute Regiment is a popular subject area for collectors, researchers and re-enactors alike.

Airborne Assault – the Museum of The Parachute Regiment and Airborne Forces is the official home of The Parachute Regiment's history, and is based at the Imperial War Museum Duxford. Along with a modern display area, the museum houses a large archive with documents dating back to the earliest days, a reserve collection and digital online archive www.paradata.org.uk. The museum is open to the public most days, with the archive open by appointment to members of the public.

In addition, there are a number of museums at locations where the Parachute Regiment have served. The former Hartenstein Hotel in Arnhem now houses a modern museum telling the story of the 1st Airborne Division and the battle of Arnhem. In the area, there are many well-kept memorials and information panels about the battle, with a number of companies offering battlefield tours. Any visit to the area should include a visit to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Oosterbeek, where just under 1,700 Commonwealth servicemen lie. Each year, schoolchildren from the area still lay flowers on each grave.

In France, the Pegasus Bridge Museum and Merville Battery tell the story of the 6th Airborne Division's operations in Normandy. The original Pegasus Bridge was replaced in 1994 by a wider, stronger structure; however, the original bridge can still be found in the Pegasus Bridge Museum next door, along with many items related to D-Day. The Cafe Gondree, the first building to be liberated on D-Day, is still open for business across the bridge; and the positions where the gliders landed have been marked out. Restoration work has been carried out at the Merville Battery, with each casement housing exhibits telling the story, including a sound-and-light show demonstrating what it would have been like at the battery. A poignant visit can be made to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery at Ranville, where many of those from The Parachute Regiment who were killed on D-Day can be found, including Pte. Emile Corteil who died aged 19, and who is buried with his Paradox Glen.

Other useful points for research include the National Archives at Kew, which holds documents such as original war diaries, and the Pegasus Archive website www.pegasusarchive.org. Service records are held by the Army Personnel Branch, with details available from <http://www.veterans-uk.info/>.

Many items associated with The Parachute Regiment have become highly collectable. These range from items of uniform such as the Denison smock, down to small items such as medal sets and uniform badges; and the value of an item can increase when the story behind it is known. However, this popularity has led to a large number of fakes and reproductions coming onto the market, some of which are made to a very high standard. Thorough research and questions as to the provenance are crucial when buying items related to The Parachute Regiment. There are a number of useful publications relating to Airborne uniforms that can be used for reference material.

In addition, a thorough inspection of the item, such as examining the buttons, should show the reasonable wear and tear expected of an item that has been used in field conditions.

British Airborne Forces have proved a popular story for living history groups to represent, and these can be found worldwide. A good group such as '89 Field Security Section' (www.89fss.com) and 'Just Ordinary Men' (www.justordinarymen.org.uk) can provide valuable insights into the story of the Airborne Forces, as well as providing historically accurate demonstrations that show how the uniforms were worn and how the equipment worked.

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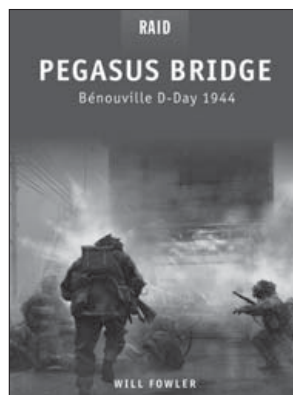
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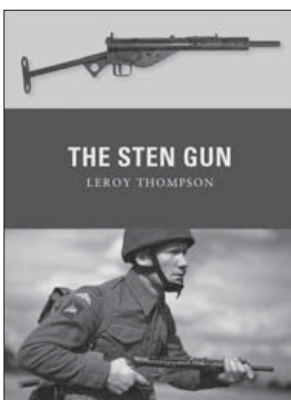
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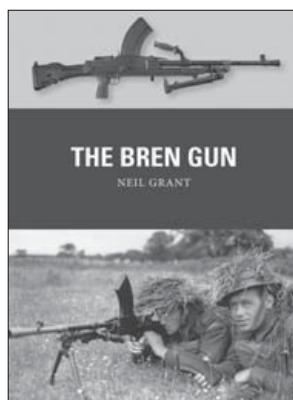
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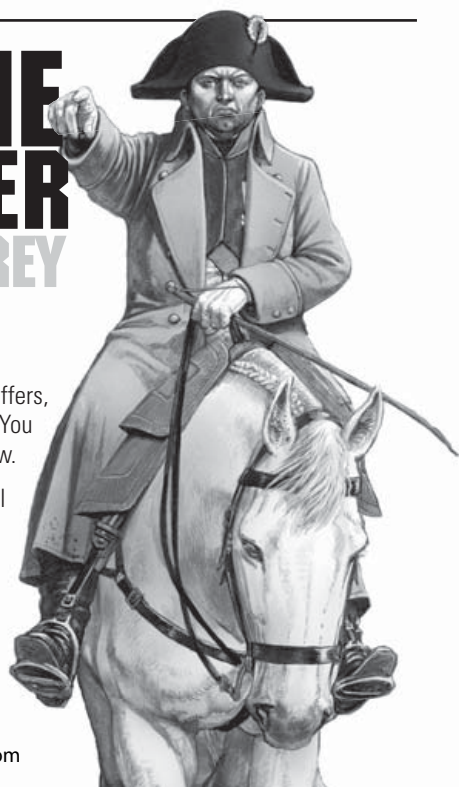
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ABBREVIATIONS

ATS	Auxiliary Territorial Service
AWOL	Absent Without Leave
CLE	Container Light Equipment
Coy	Company
CWGC	Commonwealth War Graves Commission
DZ	Drop Zone
ENSA	Entertainments National Service Association
NAAFI	Navy, Army, Air Force Institute
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
Para	Paratrooper/Parachute
PIAT	Projector Infantry Anti-Tank
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RSM	Regimental Sergeant Major
SAS	Special Air Service
SMLE	Short Magazine Lee Enfield
Sqn	Squadron
WAAF	Women's Auxiliary Air Force

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